A Place to Rest
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A Place to Rest

by LuckE1

Summary

"All I need is the air I breathe and a place to rest my head."

When tragedy strikes, Makoto is left to care for his twin siblings. With the stress of life getting to him, he struggles to make ends meet. But one day, when he runs into a certain chef, things start to change around him.

*Update: Now with Fanart!

Notes

Hello, everyone! A new fanfic for you. It's a little different than my last one, but I'm hopeful :)
Please let me know what you think!!

Happy reading~

Also, this chapter was edited by the lovely Tayu-chan!

See the end of the work for more notes

Do you know where your heart is?

"Here now, be careful, Makoto. That's it, hold her head gently. Ah, good. Don't worry if she starts crying, that's normal for a baby. Do you want to hold Ren after?"

"You're so good with the twins. They really look up to you."

"My, the storm was horrible, wasn't it? Don't worry, Makoto. Everything is okay. Calm down, calm down. You're safe."

"Makoto, what's wrong? Don't you want to have swimming lessons? N-No, no! Don't cry, sweetie! It's okay, it's okay! Maybe we'll sign you up for something else, yeah?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, we're moving, Makoto. You won't have to worry about seeing the ocean anymore. We'll get a place where you don't have to see it on your way to school anymore."

"You're pretty good at your literature class, Makoto. Want to be writer like your old man? Heh, but you can always pick what you want to be, son."

"You got in?! To the university you wanted?! Makoto, that is wonderful! We need to celebrate! Dear, get the twins! We need to tell them the wonderful news."

"How's your semester going, Makoto? Getting good grades? That's my boy! Always doing so well."

"Hey, Makoto, when will you be home for break?"

"Makoto, let's go get some lunch while the twins are at school. We'll have a nice meal, just the three of us!"

"Makoto, we're so proud of you. We love you very mu—"

Huh?

What?

I can't… I can't hear you.

Mom?

Dad?

Where…

Is that… an ambulance?

Ow, my head…

Everything is spinning.

Mom… Dad…

Makoto startled awake with a jolt, his eyes popping open to see the dark ceiling above his head.

It was… a dream?

His chest softly rose and fell as his mind finally dragged him out of the pit of his subconscious, the dream fading along with the echoing voices in his mind. While the dream did not happen often, it still brought terrible memories back like a fresh wound with hot salt jammed inside.

Glistening sweat trickled down Makoto's neck and onto the stiff couch cushion underneath of him. He lifted a hand to wipe his forehead and sighed, letting his arm cover his eyes.

This would be a long day.

He thought of his cell phone lying on the end table next to him, quietly connected to its charger.

He should call Sousuke. He knows he should. Sousuke had always told him to call if anything was wrong, no matter what.

Makoto sighed.

Sure, his pulse was racing and his body was drenched in sweat. And sure, his mind was in a fog, a haze, as thoughts raced endlessly before careening down into a dark abyss. And sure, he was sleeping on the couch in his one-bedroom apartment with an aching back and throbbing head.

But it was not an emergency. He could handle this without calling his friend.

And Sousuke would drop everything to come and help him, but Makoto did not want that. Sousuke worked too hard to get back onto his university team and he did not want to mess up that chance for him.

Makoto sighed and wiped his face again before reaching back behind his head to fumble around for his cell phone in the dark. Once his fingers felt the cool plastic, he grabbed it and pulled it to look at it, his eyes squinting at the light.

07:20.

Makoto's brow quirked and he cocked his head. Were those actual numbers? He read it again. What did that time say? He read it a third time, his mind starting to clear.

Then, Makoto jolted upright, fully awake and more alert than he would like.

"Uwah! We're *late!"* Makoto shouted.

He scrambled off of the couch and ran down the hallway to the bedroom, his hand throwing open the door and flicking on the light.

"Ran! Ren! Wake up, we're late!" Makoto shouted, running to his siblings' bedsides.

Ran groaned and pulled the covers over her head to shield her eyes from the light in the room. Ren did not even move, soft snores still coming from his nose.

Makoto sighed and grabbed Ran's shoulder, shaking her awake.

"Ran, come on, we need to get going or you'll be late to school. I still have to get to work on time!" Makoto said, trying to drag her up.

"Ugh… Onii-chan, can't we stay home today?" Ran said sluggishly.

"No," Makoto said sternly. He pulled the covers off of her completely, resulting in his sister giving a dramatic pout. "Hurry up and get ready!"

Ran huffed out a sigh and sat up, watching Makoto as he walked to Ren's bedside and started shaking him awake.

"Ren, come on, wake up!" Makoto urged.

"Mmm… five more minutes…" Ren mumbled sleepily.

"No! Not five more minutes! Now, *now!"*

Makoto pulled Ren up by his shoulders and yanked the covers off of him, making him squeak from the cold.

"Ah! Onii-chan!" Ren groaned, a few tears springing to his eyes.

"Stop crying, Ren! Didn't you hear Onii-chan?" Ran pestered as she grabbed her school clothes. "We have to get ready for school!"

"Eh? But I'm tired!" Ren complained.

"*Guys,*" Makoto said, raising his voice. His patience was rapidly thinning into air. "Just get ready. We have to leave."

After giving them both an exasperated look, Makoto stomped out of the bedroom and quickly rushed to the hall closet to grab his too-tight work clothes. He waited for Ran to finish in the bathroom before he could fully secure himself inside.

Once he was safely in the bathroom, he quickly changed into the white button-up shirt and tie, giving himself a once-over in the mirror. The tie was crooked, but he would just have to fix it at work.

He gulped.

There would be no mercy today. Today would probably be his last day of living. His boss was going to kill him for being late.

Again.

Makoto shook his head and slapped his cheeks.

No, Makoto thought. *I need to do my best today. Sousuke's father got me this job. And Sousuke would kill me if I ruined his father's good word that he put in for me. Do well for Sousuke, do well for his father, do well for Ran and Ren, and for our parents—*

"Onii-chan, Ren's crying again!" Ran shouted from the hallway.

Makoto's brows pinched, his thoughts completely derailed, and he pulled open the bathroom door to see his younger sister standing with her arms crossed across her chest and a scowl on her face. Makoto blinked at her, his head tilting a little to the side. When had she gotten such an attitude?

There was a soft sniffle that drew Makoto's attention away from the brooding Ran and towards his brother, who was sitting down on the floor near the bedroom door. He had his knees curled up to his chest with his chin resting on his arms.

"Ren," Makoto called softly. He walked over to him and knelt down to meet Ren's watery eyes. "What's wrong?"

Ren sniffed and wiped his eyes on his sleeve, his fingers desperately clinging onto his uniform.

"I don't want to go," Ren said lowly.

Ran huffed and groaned from the hallway and Makoto turned his head to shoot her a look. Ran's brows lowered and she pursed her lips, immediately looking away.

Makoto turned back to his brother and ruffled his hair, offering a small smile that he knew did not quite reach his eyes. Ren glanced up at him with a pitiful look on his face.

"I know it's hard, Ren. But you need to go to school," Makoto said. "Hey, don't you have your club today?"

Ren sniffed and nodded, making Makoto's smile grew warmer. He wiped the remaining tears from Ren's face.

"You always look forward to that," Makoto said.

Ren hesitated before looking down at his bent knees. He nodded and hummed in agreement. Makoto nodded with him and grabbed his hand.

"We should get going then, okay?" Makoto said.

Ren sniffed one last time before allowing Makoto to pull him up from the floor.

"Can we *go* now?" Ran whined from the end of the hall.

Makoto sighed and nodded, pushing Ren down the hall.

"Yes, yes. Grab your backpacks so we can get you two to school," Makoto said.

Once their bags were secured over their shoulders, Makoto guided them to the front door and

opened it, but then he froze.

"Oh, shoot! I forgot to get you guys breakfast!" Makoto said, turning on his heel to head back to the kitchen. He needed to try and find *something* for his siblings to eat.

"Onii-chan, I grabbed some already!" Ran shouted from the door.

Makoto whirled around, halfway towards kitchen, eyeing Ran with a curious stare.

"What?" Makoto asked.

Ran jerked a thumb towards her backpack and gave a cheeky smile.

"Leftovers!" Ran announced.

Makoto quirked a brow and tilted his head. "Leftovers? You mean from dinner last night?"

"Oh, the takeout was yummy!" Ren said from her side, finally showing the first smile that morning.

Ran nodded and grinned, looking quite proud of herself.

Makoto, on the other hand, ran a hand down his face and sighed. He *really* needed to start learning how to cook.

"Fine, fine, but tomorrow you need to have a proper breakfast, okay?" Makoto said, giving them both a gentle push to the hallway. He heard them squabbling in the hall and sighed as he tried to pull his shoes on.

He put his hand on the doorknob, ready to leave, when he looked back one last time. His eyes drifted over to the small wooden bookshelf in the corner, a single piece of an incense stick sitting in a shallow bowl. There were pictures above the shelves… pictures of smiling faces, happier times, and…

Makoto shook his head back and forth, finally noticing how tight his chest had gotten. He took a deep breath and released it slowly.

"Have a good day," he whispered as he shut the door behind him.

"You don't need to walk us, Onii-chan!" Ran said as the three of them stopped at an intersection.

Makoto felt the corner of his lip tug to the side as he nervously looked from side to side, watching the traffic carefully. His palms felt sweaty and his heart was working a little faster than normal, but he glanced down at Ran and gave her a placating smile.

"But I like to," Makoto said. "It makes me feel better to know that you guys get there safely."

"But we're in middle school now, Onii-chan!" Ran protested, tugging on her uniform.

"You even walked to school by yourself in middle school, Onii-chan," Ren added, rather boldly if Makoto would say.

Makoto pouted. "I did not. Sousuke walked with me."

"Ah, but we won't be alone, Onii-chan!" Ran said, reaching to grab Ren's arm and shake it. "We have each other!"

"No," Makoto said. "It's too dark when you leave school from your clubs. It's dangerous to walk the streets at night."

Ran pursed her lips and dropped Ren's arm, releasing a loud sigh. Makoto winced at the sound, making a mental note to talk to her later.

The light at the intersection changed and a few people started to walk across.

But Makoto remained frozen in place, unable to move.

He could hear the car engines roaring as they sat idle.

The footfalls of the pedestrians started to get louder.

"Makoto, we're so proud of you."

Makoto's head was throbbing.

"We love you very mu—"

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto snapped out of his gaze, a forceful tug on his sleeve urging him away from the sidewalk. He glanced down to see Ran trying to pull him towards the crosswalk. Ren stood next to her with his lips parted and his brows knitted together, creating creases in his forehead.

"Are you okay, Onii-chan?" Ren asked. "The light changed. We can go now."

"You kind of spaced out there, Onii-chan," Ran said, her face now twisting in worry.

Makoto breathed softly and smiled, allowing Ran to pull him forward and take a shaky step forward onto the road.

"Ah, sorry," Makoto apologized. "Let's get going."

Ran and Ren exchanged worried glances before turning back to cross the street, Ran finally letting go of Makoto's sleeve.

Makoto's eyes darted back and forth as they crossed the street, counting each individual footstep, and then he released a breath when his foot finally touched the sidewalk. He turned back to glance at the road and watched the light change again, allowing the cars to continue on their way. Chills shot down his spine when one of the cars loudly zoomed by and he quickened his pace, retreating as far from the road as possible.

The three of them turned another corner, just a block away from the school. Makoto smiled to himself; they were almost there. Just a few more steps and then he can hurry to catch the next train to get to his job and—

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto stuttered to a stop, almost tripping over his own feet at the sounds of his siblings' outcry. He whirled around to see both of them stopped at a restaurant, their eyes peering up at the lights. There was a dazzling chalkboard display of the daily entrées and desserts, the special of the day, as

well as the fish of the day. It was a high-scale restaurant that the three of them passed nearly every day, and nearly every day there was a chorus of—

"Please, Onii-chan?" Ran begged.

"*Please*?" Ren echoed.

They both folded their hands and looked up at Makoto with puppy-dog eyes. Makoto stared down at them, his eyes flitting back and forth from the restaurant, and he sighed, reaching up to massage the base of his neck where the headache had traveled.

"Sorry, guys," Makoto said. "We can't. Not until I get a promotion."

As his hand dropped down by his side he caught a glimpse of his watch. He sighed and shook his head again.

"Which will never happen at this rate," he added.

He grabbed them both by their shoulder and pushed them away from the pristine and expensive restaurant, fearing that even touching the spotless windows would cost them an arm and a leg.

"Now, let's go! Your morning class is about to start and I can't afford to miss work to attend another meeting with your teachers!"

"But, Onii-chan!" Ran protested, craning her neck to look back at the chalkboard display.

"I know, I know," Makoto mumbled as he pushed them forward.

His eyes scanned the window where his siblings had almost pressed their faces against, looking for any smudges. But instead, Makoto saw a sign.

Now Hiring, it read.

He blinked at the elegant design as he continued to push his siblings past the restaurant.

Who knew an elegant restaurant actually took interviews from the public? Makoto thought. His eyes flitted up to the restaurant name.

Nanase Rest House

Makoto wondered why in the world the owner came up with a plain name for such an elegant restaurant.

But Makoto tucked the thought away into the back of his mind and continued down the sidewalk, Ran and Ren's middle school in sight. He gave them one more firm push towards the school gate where several other stragglers were rushing to get inside.

"Okay, I will come and pick you up after work. Just wait inside the gate like you normally do. No fooling around, okay?" Makoto said, exasperated.

"Okay, Onii-chan," both Ran and Ren mumbled, catching on to their brother's plea.

Makoto patted them both on the head and offered a sincere, gentle smile.

"Have a good day," Makoto said to both of them.

"Bye, Onii-chan!" both of them chirped back, small smiles appearing on their faces.

"Hey, race you inside!" Ran challenged, and took off inside the gate.

Ren's smile immediately disappeared, a distressed frown replacing it.

"Wait, Ran! Don't run! *Wait!"* Ren shouted and chased after her, his legs almost buckling under him.

Makoto's hands clenched as he watched them head to the front doors of the building. The pitter-pattering of their feet softened and soon enough, both of them disappeared inside. The door clicked shut behind them and they were both inside the building.

He released a breath, his fist relaxing by his side. He could feel his heart hammering inside his chest just like it did every morning he walked them to school.

But it was okay now.

They were safe.

He could breathe and little more calmly now.

Suddenly, Makoto's arm was bumped, and a few middle-school boys passed by, shouting their apologies back to him. Makoto blinked back into consciousness, once again hearing the sounds of footsteps and passing cars along with the gentle fall wind brushing past his nose.

Makoto released a shaky sigh and lifted his arm to glance down at the watch on his wrist.

"*Uwah!* I'm late!" Makoto gasped. He whirled around and took off down the street where he had just come from.

His boss would surely kill him today.

Makoto took a sharp turn around the corner, past the bakery and little shop and heading back towards the train station.

Just one more block and I can catch the next train, Makoto thought as he headed towards that same restaurant from earlier. He was almost at the front door of the restaurant. *Just have to make it before the train leaves and—*

Suddenly, the front door of the restaurant opened right in front of Makoto's path, but he could not stop in time. He slammed into the door, knocking down the chalk display and completely bowling over whoever had the misfortune of stepping outside that day.

Makoto fell sideways, landing hard on his shoulder and bonking his head on the sidewalk. He shut his eyes tight as a piercing ring echoed in his ears and his splitting headache bloomed into a full-fledged migraine. He groaned as he held his head, fully embarrassed. He hoped that the sidewalk would just open up and swallow him whole.

He would have to apologize. He hoped that he had not broken that beautiful sign—someone had obviously worked hard on creating the elaborate drawings.

Oh, no. What if they had *hired* an artist to do all of that for them? Would Makoto be sued for ruining their artwork?!

"Are you okay?"

Makoto stilled at the sound of a smooth voice ringing from above him. He cracked one eye open, the light fighting against him as he tried to see the mysterious person standing above him. His vision finally cleared and the first thing Makoto saw was…

Blue.

The man had stunning deep blue eyes.

And jet black hair.

Then, he noticed a hand that was extended down to him.

Makoto's eyes widened as his brows climbed up his forehead. This was all so…

"Are you okay?"

…familiar.

"Um…"

Makoto jolted, his eyes glancing back up to meet the stranger's eyes. His brows were pulled together and slightly upturned in a worried gaze. That was when Makoto noticed his chef's uniform, now covered in dirt on one side.

"Uwah! I'm so sorry!" Makoto said as he scrambled to sit up. His headache protested every movement and pulsated sharply against his skull, making him groan and put a hand to his head.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?" the man asked, now kneeling in front of Makoto with his hands hovering over his shoulders.

Makoto's lips wobbled and he grit his teeth, begging the pounding to stop. He glanced up at the man, whose eyes were now blown wide in almost a panic.

"A-Ah, yeah… sorry," Makoto mumbled. He clambered to his feet, his knees shaking under his weight. The man stood up with him, his face relaxing. "I'm sorry about that. I really wasn't watching where I was going."

The man blinked at him and his brows lowered, and Makoto could not tell if he was angry or confused. Makoto gulped and glanced down at the chalkboard display, wincing when he saw that one of the wooden legs had snapped.

"Oh, geez," Makoto muttered, eyeing the display. "I'm really, *really* sorry about—"

"It's fine," the man interrupted.

Makoto was thrown off at his bluntness, blinking rapidly at the man. He opened his mouth to ask about the cost for the display, but suddenly remembered why he was in such a hurry in the first place. His heart jumped into his throat as he pulled up his wrist to check the time.

"Um…" the man started again. "Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor or—"

"Oh, no, I'm really late!" Makoto exclaimed, cutting off the man's sentence. "Ah, sorry about running into you and breaking your sign! I'll buy you a new one! And a new chef's uniform!"

The man reached out his hand to stop him and he opened his mouth.

"Oh, you don't need to—"

"B-Bye!"

And with those parting words, Makoto took off down the street, feeling his heartbeat throb in his head with each pulse.

After rushing to catch the overcrowded train, Makoto made it to his office building, his lungs burning and head still thumping with a sharp ache. He forced himself to run up the stairs as opposed to taking the slow elevator. He finally reached the fifth floor of the tall building and entered through the doors of his place of employment: a small marketing company in Tokyo.

Makoto was one the only guy in charge of maintaining stock in the office— making sure each important sales rep had all of their supplies in order. From pens to desk chairs and computer screens, to even maintaining the organization of clients, Makoto had to make sure everything was in their perfect place.

Makoto sent a million thank-you notes to Sousuke's father—*"Thank you, Uncle! Thank you so much! I owe you!"*—for helping him to get this job, especially since he was so unqualified for the position.

For the most part, Makoto was average at his job. He got along with his coworkers and even tried to make light conversation with them from time to time.

But upon entering the office door that morning, the receptionist's eyes widened, almost in fear. For herself or Makoto's own life, Makoto was unsure, but she looked like she wanted to disappear.

"A-Ah, T-Tachibana-san…" the receptionist stuttered out. "G-Good morning."

Makoto tried giving a small smile. "Good morning," he greeted as he passed her.

He headed to his desk as quickly as possible, ignoring the stares he was receiving. He tried his best to give a smile, albeit strained, and walked to his desk, sitting down and going through his files and supply requests. There were already a ton of missed calls and a large stack of requests on his desk.

Makoto sighed, pushing the heels of his hands into his eyes to try and relieve the pressure of the headache. Then, he took a deep breath and tried to get to work. He sifted through the files, thankful that he had not seen his boss, yet. So, maybe he was safe for now.

Makoto glanced up at his computer screen and blinked at the harsh light, making the pain in his head sharper, piercing and causing his ears to ring. Makoto held his head as the room lightly spun, and he leaned forward until his forehead rested on his desk.

This… pain… Makoto thought. *It's worse…*

Ugh, I just want this pain to stop.

"Makoto, we're so proud of you."

Makoto groaned softly and closed his eyes, feeling his chest constrict painfully.

"We love you very mu—"

"Stop it," Makoto muttered aloud. His eyes stayed closed, the dull pain in his chest fluttering and thudding with every heartbeat.

"Hey, Makoto, how are your classes going?"

Makoto's mother, who shared the same green eyes, smiled at him lightly as she sat down at the table.

"Oh, they're going great!" Makoto answered. "I'm enjoying the education program. I think it really fits with what I want to do."

His father laughed softly from across the table, adjusting his glasses on his nose and giving the same head-tilt smile that the Tachibana household shared.

"You always do well in everything you do, son," he said. "You're still set with being a teacher?"

Makoto nodded and hummed, picking up one of the books on the table and passing it to his father.

"There's a test I'd have to take to get certified once I finish the degree, but I think I'll be prepared for it," Makoto said, pointing to the requirements to get a teaching license. His father smiled and read over the requirements.

"Oh, these look like a lot of requirements, Makoto," he said. "Can you handle it?"

Makoto nodded, more enthusiastically this time.

"I think so! My professors are helping me a lot," Makoto said.

"Is Tokyo treating you okay?" his mother asked, leaning forward and pushing some of Makoto's bangs from his eyes. "Your apartment isn't too cold, is it? I hear it gets colder in the city."

"Mom, I'm fine," Makoto said with a gentle smile. "Tokyo is actually really nice. It's crowded, but I'm getting used to it. And my apartment is fine. It's small, but it's enough for me."

His mother hesitated, studying his face for any lies, and then put on a warm smile.

"Okay," she said. "As long as you're eating well and are safe."

"Of course I am," Makoto said.

His mother smiled and tilted her head. She stood to her feet and put her hands on her hips.

"Well, we should celebrate," she said. She looked at Makoto with kind eyes. "Makoto, let's go get some lunch while the twins are at school. We'll have a nice meal, just the three of us!"

Makoto smiled at her and nodded, standing to his feet.

"Okay!"

"Tachibana."

"Where would you like to go, Makoto?"

"Tachibana!"

"Oh! Why don't we go to—"

"Tachibana!"

Makoto startled awake, his whole body jumping when he heard a booming voice overhead. He shot up from his desk and glanced around. Had he fallen asleep? What time was it?

"Tachibana."

Makoto's heart seized and his shoulders tensed. He recognized that voice. Slowly, he glanced up to look at the man who hovered over him.

It was his boss.

He was glaring down at Makoto with a terrible scowl, his brows pushed together and his teeth bared. He looked incredibly more angry than usual.

"My office," his boss growled, making Makoto shiver. "*Now.*"

Makoto gulped and mumbled out a feeble "yes, sir" as he sauntered away. He knew he was going to be in big trouble.

He got out of his seat carefully and passed by his coworkers with silent footsteps, keeping his eyes focused on the ground. Every step felt like an eternity.

After a few more steps, he reached the dreaded door at the end of the hall. His hands shook as he reached for the doorknob, the metal shaking in his grasp. He took a deep breath and turned the doorknob, opening it slowly and entering with hunched shoulders.

"Y-You… wanted to see me, sir?" Makoto asked.

His boss sat down at his desk, his frustrated scowl still painted on his face. He took one look at Makoto and pointed to a chair in front of him.

"Sit," he sneered.

Makoto jumped at his tone, gingerly walking over to the chairs to sit. He held his knees tightly to prevent them form shaking.

"Do you realize that in the past month, you have been late eight times?" his boss started.

Makoto blinked at him, his heart leaping inside his chest. He tried to swallow past the lump in his throat but realized that his mouth was dry. So instead, he tried to speak.

"Uh, I, um…"

Oh, and did his voice just crack?

"And this morning, when you finally decide to grace us with your presence, I find you asleep on your desk," his boss added.

"B-But, I—"

"Go gather up your things, Tachibana," his boss said, cutting Makoto's thoughts like a sharp knife. "You're fired."

Makoto's heart plummeted into his stomach and sat like a heavy rock. His hands gripped his knees even harder, making them numb.

"F-Fired?" Makoto echoed. "B-But…"

"I'll have Arima send your last paycheck directly to your address," his boss—former boss—said gruffly as he folded his arms across his chest.

Makoto licked his lips, still frozen in that uncomfortable chair. He shivered as his former boss stood up from behind his desk and walked over to the door, opening it wide.

"Now go," he said. "Get out of this office."

Makoto grimaced, squeezing his knees one last time before standing to his feet. Tingles danced down his calves and up his thighs as he passed by the boss, his head hanging low, and he took a silent walk of shame back to his desk to grab his things.

The walk back to the apartment was numbing and cold, the fall wind finally cutting into Makoto's skin and biting at his bones. Of course, he had forgotten his heavier coat today, just to add insult to injury.

On his way up, he checked the mail, seeing bills upon bills, and a letter from Social Services. Makoto felt his eye twitch at that and sighed, tucking the letters under his arm.

He entered his apartment and slipped off his shoes, setting down his sad box of desk items next to the couch. He placed the mail and the burning letter down inside the box. He would deal with that later.

But at the moment, Makoto needed to talk to someone.

He needed advice.

He needed *help*.

Makoto walked into the next room and turned on the single lamp in the corner. He saw the wooden shelves in the corner, his body shuddering, and walked over to kneel in front of it. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and he clapped his hands together.

When he opened his eyes, Makoto saw the happy faces of his parents staring back at him.

But only in photographs.

Makoto was kneeling in front of their shrine.

"Hi, mom. Dad," Makoto mumbled. His clasped hands shook in front of him as he spoke. "I, uh… I wish you were still here. You could probably tell me what I could do now."

Makoto stared at the picture of his mom, smiling with a gentle beauty that could only belong to her. Then, he looked at his dad, where he knew he got his broad shoulders and bad eyesight from.

"I, uh…" Makoto said. "I lost my job today."

Makoto took another deep breath and tried for a smile, but it was strained and wobbly, easily

breaking as a sob reached his throat. Tears sprang from his eyes and slid down his cheeks and he lowered his head to look at the ground, unable to look at his parent's faces any longer.

"You always do well in everything you do, son."

"Sorry," Makoto whispered through his tears. "But I didn't do well today."

Makoto hiccupped as more tears fell down his cheeks. He lifted his hand to cover his eyes as he lowered his head further until it touched the ground.

"I'm *so* sorry."

Do you think you can find it?

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow, I feel so honored. Great response on the first chapter, everyone :) You're going to make me cry!!
Here's chapter 2 for you :)
Edited by the lovely Tayu-chan <3

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Sousuke asked, his brows drawn up in slight worry as he watched Makoto pack up the last box in the living room.

Makoto nodded fervently at first, wincing when pain spiked through the back of his head. Once the pain had dulled, he gave a small smile and hummed, taping up the box labeled "fragile."

"Everything will be fine, Sousuke. I've still got my apartment for the twins to stay. And your dad got me that job, remember?" Makoto said as he smoothed out the tape.

Sousuke reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "Are you sure? I mean… you guys can stay with my parents here. Makoto, you can keep going to school, just a more local one. Don't throw away that chance—"

"It's not throwing it away," Makoto interrupted softly. "It's just… on hold until things settle down. Besides, Ran and Ren need help getting through this. I can't just put off their lives for my sake."

"But you're still hurting, too," Sousuke said, making Makoto's blood turn ice cold in his veins. "It's okay to take things slowly, Makoto. It's okay to grieve."

Makoto stared down at the box, his hand frozen on the tape. He had carefully packed the new shrines inside, making sure they were wrapped in enough bubble wrap and paper to prevent scratches. His lips wobbled and he pressed them into a tight line to prevent any tears.

"Thank you for your concern, Sousuke," Makoto said gently. He turned his head to look up at him, giving him a watery smile. "If anything happens, you'll be the first person I call."

Makoto stared down at his phone through sore, puffy eyes.

On the screen was Sousuke's contact, ready to call. His thumb hovered over the green button and shook, refusing to lower those final few centimeters. His thumb touched the key and…

The phone dropped on the floor in between his feet and he held his head in his hands. He sucked in a breath and held it in his stomach to prevent more sobs from crawling up his throat.

I'm sorry, Sousuke, Makoto prayed, hoping that his friend would somehow get the message.

He lowered his hands and looked down at where his phone dropped. It landed right next to his foot and alongside the opened mail. The phone bill, insurance, medical bills, rent… funeral costs… they

were all piling up quickly.

Earlier, Makoto sat down and added up everything with the calculator on his phone, finding out that he would be okay to pay off most of the bills with his last paycheck.

But…

The pantry and refrigerator were almost empty.

And that was not the only issue.

Makoto turned his head to look at the burning letter that sat on the small coffee table in front him. The envelope, addressed from *Tokyo Social Services,* was tattered at the edges from when Makoto had opened it with shaking fingers. The contents were enough to make Makoto's knees give out on him.

Dear Tachibana Makoto,

We are informing you of an upcoming house visit from one of our social workers, scheduled for Friday of next week. Be advised that you are required to have the following for the inspection…

Makoto tore his eyes away from the letter and hung his head. One of the requirements was that the guardian had a steady income, which Makoto had had for the last four months up until now. If Makoto did not have a job then…

If you do not meet all of these requirements, then further action will have to take place.

…then Ran and Ren would be taken away.

Makoto choked on a sob and released a huff of air while tears jumped out of his eyes. His breath hitched and he reached up to claw at his shirt, desperately wanting to rip his heart out.

I can't lose them, Makoto thought as he squeezed his eyes shut.

I can't lose them, too.

That afternoon, once he had slept off his migraine, Makoto was found standing in front of the gate to Ran and Ren's middle school. He was early for once, which felt foreign to him. He was usually at work until Ran and Ren were done with their club activities. But today, he was there at the gate before the activities were done.

Makoto sighed and hung his head, shoving his hands further into his coat pockets. The rent was due at the end of the month. As well as old medical bills that still needed paying off. His wallet burned a hole in his pocket just thinking about it.

How would he explain this to Ran and Ren?

He needed to come up with a plan and fast before they were forced out onto the streets. He needed to find a new job, and a new source of income so that his siblings could just eat. He needed—

"Eh? Onii-chan?"

Makoto jumped and lifted his head, blinking rapidly when he saw Ran and Ren quickly approaching him from beyond the school gate. They both collided into him and wrapped their arms around his waist.

"What are you doing here, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, chirpy as ever.

"Yeah! You're usually not here for another fifteen minutes," Ren said, his smile wide.

Makoto glanced down at their bright and smiling faces. They looked like they had had a good day today, which was a rarity in their household these days.

"I, uh…"

Makoto wanted to savor it. He would come up with a plan later. But for now… he just wanted to see his siblings happy.

"I just wanted to surprise you," Makoto said as he patted their heads. "Are you guys ready to go home?"

"Mhm!" Ran hummed. She started to lead the way down the block towards their apartment. "Let's go eat some dinner!"

"I want miso ramen!" Ren said, jogging up next to her.

"With takoyaki!" Ran said.

"Huh? That doesn't mix well."

"So what? It'll still be yummy!"

Makoto watched them fondly as they spoke, trying his best to keep his smile from wobbling. He wanted what was best for them, and he would do anything to preserve what they had left.

So with a painful smile, Makoto walked alongside them and listened to how wonderful their club activities had been that day, not daring to mention how awful his day had been.

After a small meal that both of the twins were luckily satisfied with, they had retired to their bedroom to start on homework, leaving Makoto alone in the living room. His laptop sat closed on the coffee table in front of him, seeming to stare at him.

Makoto had only six days left to find a new job before the Social Worker would show up. He had even fewer days to get some sort of steady income before the next bill would be due. The landlord was already getting antsy about his overdue rent.

Makoto remembered that he had checked his bank account online just the day before, blanching when he saw that it was almost empty. His parents did not set aside a lot of money for them in their wills. A majority of their funds were used for Makoto's college fees, and his stomach plummets every time he thinks about that.

I have to find a job, Makoto thought. *I have to check them before… before…*

Feeling the onset of a panic attack, Makoto forced himself to relax, taking wheezing breaths until his lungs ached. After a few moments, his breaths started to slow, calming the stutter in his chest. With one final huff of air, he slapped his cheeks hard, forcing small tears to jump from his eyes.

"Okay," he said aloud and he grabbed his laptop from the coffee table. He opened it up and clicked on the Internet tab, typing *job openings* in the search bar.

"Time to search."

Thank you for your interest in our company. Unfortunately, we cannot accept you due to…

Good evening, Tachibana Makoto. We received your application but the position requires more experience…

"Hello, Tachibana-san. We are calling to inform you that we received your application. Sadly, we will not be having a follow-up interview because…"

We are sorry to inform you…

You need more schooling…

You are not experienced enough…

We are sorry to say that we cannot hire you at this time.

Makoto clicked his laptop shut after reading the fifteenth rejection email and rubbed his face with a heavy sigh.

"What's wrong, Onii-chan?"

"E-Eh? Oh, n-nothing. Let's get you guys ready for school."

A few days later, after Makoto had submitted his résumé to over twenty positions in the area and received painfully harsh rejections, his phone rang. It was from a nearby company that was offering a similar position to his previous job. The man on the phone seemed impressed that he had worked at the marketing company and asked him to come in for an interview.

Makoto had quivering butterflies in his stomach as he quickly got dressed in a nice collared shirt and pants. He glanced at himself in the mirror as he grabbed his tie from the sink.

This could be my chance, Makoto thought. *If I can get this job, then things will be more secure. I can give Ran and Ren a chance for a better life.*

He tied his tie as best as he could, albeit a little crooked, and hurried to get some food ready for Ran and Ren. He packed the last of the rice and vegetables for their bentos and wrapped them up. His stomach protested, sending hungry pangs at the sight of food. Makoto sighed and shook his head, tightening the knots on the bento wraps to stop his temptation.

Food had been… tight the past few days. But he hoped that the twins had not noticed anything amiss.

Once Makoto had also given them the last of the convenient store fish for breakfast, he pushed them out the door and led them to school, his mind buzzing with the opportunity for a new job and full bellies.

They passed by the restaurant again—"*Onii-chan, when can we go?" "Never." "Eh? Why?" "Why's your face all red, Onii-chan?*"—and Makoto dropped off the twins.

Once he saw that they were safely inside, he turned on his heel and headed down the street to the station, traveling a few stops until he got to the western district. His held his résumé tightly in between his fingers as he approached the building, his heart pounding thickly against his chest as he crossed the busy street.

You can do this, Makoto told himself. *Just relax. Relax. Relax…*

A zooming car sent a violent jolt down Makoto's spine, making him jump and sprint forward to the sidewalk. His jittering legs somehow managed to carry him down the sidewalk and right to the company building.

When he found the building, he walked in and spoke to the receptionist, who guided him up to the top floor to the manager's office. Makoto gulped as he rode the elevator up ten floors to the top and walked into the office, speaking to yet another receptionist.

Makoto was jittery as he sat down and waited for his name to be called. He tugged at the frays on his dress pants and bit his lip until it was raw, shakily trying to steady his breathing.

And, finally, his name was called. Makoto jumped up from the seat and was guided into the manager's office. When he walked in, a short, bulky man sitting behind a desk looked up and smiled gently.

"Ah, welcome, Tachibana-san," the man said, standing to his feet and offering a small bow. Makoto scrambled to bow deeply to the man and stuttered a soft greeting in reply. "Please, have a seat."

Makoto gulped as he sat down in the chair, his limbs tingling. He sat stiffly with his hands clasped tight in his lap. He had placed his résumé on the man's desk and watched as he quietly studied it with a thoughtful expression.

At first, he seemed open and gentle, asking questions about Makoto's background at the marketing firm and the experiences he had while working there. He even asked about the manager of the firm, Makoto chuckling and saying that he was as terrifying as ever.

But, as the man's eyes scanned the page, his brows pushed together. Makoto's stomach tightened in an uncomfortable knot and he fidgeted in his seat, somehow hoping that would untangle it.

"Tachibana-san," the man said, looking over the résumé in his hands one last time with a quirked brow. "I see that you don't have a degree."

Makoto's heart jumped and his smile became strained. The knot clenched tighter, sending a fire to his chest.

"Ah, y-yes. Er, I mean! No! No, sir. I don't have a degree," Makoto fumbled, feeling his cheeks burn.

The man paused and looked over the résumé again, then back up to look at Makoto questioningly.

"But you worked at the Tokyo Marketing Firm on the east side of town," the man said. "How did you manage to get that job without any degree?"

Makoto squirmed in the chair. It was suddenly too hot in the tiny office.

"Um… a close friend of mine recommended me and they decided to hire me," Makoto said.

The man's brows lowered sharply. Makoto gulped.

"And… how long did you say you worked at that company?" the man asked.

"Oh, uh…" Makoto rubbed his palms on his dress pants to soak up the sweat. His hands then found each other in his lap and clenched *hard.* "About four months."

"Four months," the man echoed plainly.

His face no longer had the enthusiastic shine that it had when Makoto had first walked in. His eyes drooped and his mouth was pressed into a tight line. He looked bored.

"Okay, then," the man said, setting down the sad résumé on his desk. "And you left the job because?"

Makoto's heart froze and then cracked.

"Uh," Makoto started intelligently. He felt a bead of sweat slide down his temple. "They… they let me go."

The man's features instantly darkened. "You mean to tell me that you were fired?"

His heart then shattered, the pieces settling in his stomach and poking him in the ribs.

"Um…" Makoto stuttered, his voice lowering. "Y-Yes."

The man licked his lips and rubbed his temple, and Makoto lowered his eyes to look at the floor in between his feet.

"I see," the man finally said with a sigh. "Well, to be honest, when I saw that you worked for the Tokyo Marketing Firm, I was immediately interested. But it was my own fault that I didn't do my homework."

Makoto swallowed and shrunk in on himself, his shoulders hunching up by his ears and his hands squeezing into tight fists on his lap.

"Well, Tachibana-san," the man said pointedly. "I'm afraid that we cannot hire you. I thought you would have had more experience if you had worked for that firm, but…" The man paused to wipe his face. "My, this is disappointing."

Makoto's shoulders sagged and he bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," Makoto apologized.

The man hummed and handed Makoto back his résumé, Makoto receiving it with shaking fingers.

"Yes," the man said. "I'm sure you are."

Makoto dragged his tired legs down the sidewalk, ignoring the cold that nipped at his nose and ears. He had been walking for hours, time lost to him as his head was muddled with fierce and harsh thoughts.

He had ended up on the eastern side of town, closer to his apartment, when he stopped, leaning against the brick wall of some building. He did not even bother to look up at the sign.

Makoto glanced down at the résumé in his hand and sighed sadly at it. His chest tugged painfully as he read over it, his own failures screaming back at him.

What am I going to do now? He asked himself.

Makoto's eyes filled with tears as he slid down to sit on the cold cement, his legs bent and his head hiding in his arms. Over twenty applications and they all turned him down, each more painful than

the last. His phone sat heavily in his pocket like a brick.

I need to call Sousuke, Makoto thought. *He would want to know about this.*

He crumpled his résumé in his fist and held himself tighter. It was a phone call that Makoto did not want to make.

"Um… are you okay?"

Makoto jumped at the sound and snapped his head up.

Blue. It was another sea of blue.

Why was this all so...

"Are you okay?"

...familiar?

Makoto jolted when he realized he had been staring and finally glanced at the person standing in front of him. When he saw the black hair and white apron, his breath caught.

It was the chef from before.

"Oh," the chef said, his expression still deadpan. "It's you. From before."

The tips of Makoto's ears burned red and he quickly wiped the tears from his cheeks. He scrambled to his feet, bracing himself against the brick wall, and stuffed his résumé in his coat pocket.

"A-Ah, mmn," Makoto hummed, rubbing the back of his head. He glanced up and finally noticed that he had been standing in front of the Nanase Rest House restaurant. "Sorry. I'm probably loitering around here, aren't I? I probably shouldn't hang out here so much, especially if I haven't paid for your chalkboard display, yet."

He chuckled breathily and caught another tear that threatened to slide down his cheek, offering the chef a wobbly smile. But the chef's brows twitched and lowered, looking more… irritated?

"It's not a problem," the chef said. "We can get a new one."

Makoto's lips pressed harder together to prevent cries from escaping his throat and it ended up looking like a pained smile. He tilted his head and tried to smile wider.

"Is that so?" Makoto croaked. He cursed himself internally when his voice cracked. As a diversion, he checked his watch. "Well, I must be taking up your time. I'll get out of your way," Makoto said, lowering his head and trying to hurry past the chef.

But the chef put up his hand, stopping Makoto in his tracks.

"You were crying," the chef said.

Makoto winced. He felt as if this guy was peering through his soul. He quickly averted his eyes and forced a strange, quivering smile onto his face.

"I… I'm okay," Makoto said, his smile breaking as it fell into a wobbling frown. "Really."

The chef made a strangled noise. Makoto could see the chef's hand move forward, almost touching

his shoulder before Makoto pulled away.

"Sorry," Makoto apologized, ducking his head so the chef would not see his tears. "I'll be leaving now."

"Wait—"

"I'll try and get you the money for a new sign. I promise," Makoto said with a wobbling smile as he brushed past the chef, his ears burning as he rushed away from the chef with the mesmerizing blue eyes.

His jittering legs carried him to Ran and Ren's school, where he slumped against the opened gate and waited for classes to be over.

"Hey, it's the crybaby!"

Ren jolted in front of his shoe locker and dropped his street shoes on the floor, both of them clattering and bouncing in different directions. He slowly turned his head and saw the three faces he had been trying to avoid all day. They were the second-years who were in the same club as Ren, who he had managed to avoid at club activities this afternoon. But, unfortunately, he could not get away from them at the shoe lockers today.

"Hey, hey, Tachibana! Are you gonna cry again?" one of them asked, looming over Ren with a wicked smile on his face.

"Yeah! You almost cried when you broke your dumb colored pencils in club today!" the tallest of the three scoffed, moving forward to get in Ren's face.

Ren cowered away from them until his back hit the lockers, tears immediately springing to his eyes.

"Oh, look! He's actually crying!" the third one laughed, pointing at Ren's glossy eyes.

"No way! Tachibana, you shouldn't cry so much. You're in middle school now!"

"Yeah! Middle-schoolers don't cry!"

Ren sniffed and lowered his head, his shoulder hunching up by his ears.

Don't cry, don't cry, Ren told himself, desperately trying to hold back the tears from spilling.

A flat palm slammed against the lockers next to Ren's head, making him flinch and recoil. His shoulders started to shake and he glanced up at the boys before shutting his eyes tight.

Why hadn't he had his growth spurt, yet?

"We should probably teach you how not to cry," one of them sneered.

Another slam against the locker by Ren's shoulder and he was slumping down further.

Don't cry, don't cry, Ren thought as the tears were about to squeeze out of his eyes. *Don't cry, don't —*

"HEY!"

Ren's eyes popped open to see a flash of long, brown hair followed by a loud "oof!" And soon enough, one of the bullies had stumbled backward a few steps and an angry girl was standing in front of him.

"Stay away from my brother!"

Ren's breath hitched.

"R-Ran?" Ren whispered, seeing his twin sister standing in between him and the bullies.

"Why are you always coming to his defense?" one of the boys asked, looking more agitated than before.

"Yeah, he's such a crybaby!" the other spat.

Ran's hands curled into fists and she took a step forward.

"I *said,"* Ran hissed before she pushed the leader of three back, making him stumble even further away from Ren. "*Leave him alone."*

The three boys hesitated as they stared at Ran's intimidating snarl. With peeved murmurings escaping their lips, they turned away from Ren's shoe locker and left out of the school.

Ran watched them leave, her eyes fierce and fists shaking. When they were out of sight, she turned on her heel and stomped over to her shoe locker, swinging the door open and dropping her street shoes onto the ground.

"Ran…" Ren said softly, wiping his face. "I… s… sorr—"

"Let's go," Ran said, slamming her locker shut and turning to leave.

Ren floundered a bit, hurrying to put his shoes on.

"Wait, Ran!" Ren called.

He quickly shut his locker and hurried out to Ran, who was waiting for him by the entrance with her arms folded across her chest and her foot lightly tapping.

"Ah," Ren said intelligently when he saw the scowl on her face. "U-Um…"

Ran sighed heavily, cutting her brother off, and shut her eyes for a moment, rubbing her hand on her face.

"Why do you have to cry all the time, Ren?" Ran asked as she dropped her hand.

Ren flinched back as she turned her stare on him, not daring to open his mouth. He gulped and lowered his gaze, his hands clutching the straps of his backpack.

Ran sighed again. "Forget it. Let's go wait by the gate for Onii-chan."

Ren wiped his nose on his sleeve and followed the sound of his sister's footsteps down the path towards the gate. He kept his eyes glued to the pavement, his neck and back aching from the strenuous day. His body was drained, and all he wanted to do when he got home was work on his art project for his club.

"Oh? Onii-chan?"

Before Ren could even react, he bumped into his sister's back, fumbling backward a few steps. He glanced up to see his big brother looking at both of them with a strange smile on his face. His reddened eyes twitched as he tried to lift a hand to wave at them.

Normally, Ran and Ren would be excited to see their brother so early. But today, their older brother looked pained.

"You're here early," Ren said, his eyes curious but his brows creased. "You're… surprising us again?"

Makoto stared down at them both. He opened his mouth to answer but his jaw quivered so badly that he could not get a word out. Instead, he closed his mouth and cleared his throat, reaching up to tug at the collar of his shirt.

"Is everything okay, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, ever so observant and blunt as usual.

Ren glanced at her, seeing that her eyes were big. She obviously sensed something was off—she always could. It made Ren's stomach flip.

"Ran, Ren," Makoto said gently, making Ren snap his head back to look up at his brother. Makoto got down on one knee to be at their eye level, something he had not done in a while. It made the knot in Ren's stomach tighten even more. "There's… there's something I need to tell you."

"Eh? What is it?" Ran asked.

"Is it… bad?" Ren asked tentatively, his hands moving down to clutch at the fabric of his pants.

Ran and Ren saw Makoto bite his lip and he sighed heavily, reaching up to rub his head. Ren pressed his lips together and fiddled with the hem of his untucked shirt.

"Well, a few days ago…" Makoto started, his eyes flitting to the ground for a moment. Ren watched a bead of sweat slide down his brother's temple as he tried to speak. "I, uh… I lost my job."

Both Ran and Ren jumped, staring up at their brother with bulging eyes. They hesitated, their jaws slack and hands limp by their sides.

Ren's lips widened into a grimace and started to twitch, his eyes prickling with fresh tears. He could feel it coming—another breakdown of tears pushing at the back of his eyes. It would burst at any moment now; the dam would break and he would instantly fall apart.

"Why?!"

But before any tears could fall form Ren's eyes, Ran blurted out her question, making him jump and turn to stare at her with wide eyes. Her brows were knitted together in distress and Ren could not help but feel partially responsible for her grief today.

"Why would they fire you, Onii-chan?" Ran asked desperately.

She looked ready to fight someone, so Ren moved closer to nudge her arm to get her to calm down before she went ballistic.

But Makoto's sad smile seemed to calm her down, and he opened his mouth to reply in a small voice.

"I was late too many times," Makoto explained.

Ren jolted at his words, quickly forgetting about calming his sister, and his face scrunched up in a painful grimace.

Late too many times? Ren thought as he lowered his gaze to the ground. *Was that… because…*

Ren's lip and chin quivered as his hands white-knuckled the straps of his backpack. He kept his gaze glued to his shoes.

"What are you going to do?" Ran asked, ignoring her twin brother's distress.

Makoto's smile faltered a little as he scratched his cheek.

"I'm looking for a new job," Makoto said. "I had an interview today but…"

Ran was looking at him like he had two heads while Ren avoided any eye contact altogether. After a moment of staring at their faces, Makoto sighed and reached up to pat their heads gently.

"Don't worry, okay?" Makoto said. "I'll take care of you guys."

The twins had worried looks on their faces as Makoto rose to his feet. He tried for another smile, more reassuring than the last.

"I promise," Makoto added, more firmly this time.

Ran and Ren's shoulders sagged a little, some tension immediately releasing from their little bodies. Ran looked a little skeptical while Ren was still teary-eyed, his gaze still pointedly avoiding his siblings.

"C'mon," Makoto said, gently grabbing their shoulders and pulling them away from the school gates. "Let's go home."

Ran hesitated only for a moment before she started following Makoto down the street. Ren followed behind glumly, his mouth wobbling as he struggled to keep the tears at bay.

Did his brother really lose his job because of—

"Oh, hold on, guys."

Ren almost bonked his nose into his sister's back as they abruptly stopped, Makoto looking up at a construction site. There were several men with orange vests and yellow helmets working around metal frames. It looked like they were building a new skyscraper.

"I need to go see something real quick," Makoto said, pointing to the small work trailer next to the site. "Stay away from the road, okay?"

Ran and Ren watched him as he hurried into the work trailer, their heads cocking to the side.

"What's that all about?" Ran muttered, pursing her lips to the side.

Ren blinked at her sudden foul mood and took a step back, feeling his chin quivering even more. He glanced up at the work trailer where his brother disappeared and studied the windows to distract himself from crying. A dirty sign in the window caught his eye and he squinted to see it.

Laborers Needed

"Did you guys get enough to eat?" Makoto asked as he gathered up the dishes.

Ran nodded happily, finally in a better mood, and praised Makoto's improved cooking skills. She helped gather up some dishes to put in the sink, but she paused when she reached for Ren's plate.

Ren's face was pulled downward in a tired frown, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy. He managed to eat everything on his plate but still seemed unsatisfied. It was a gnawing feeling that churned the good food inside his stomach.

"Are you done, Ren?" Ran asked, curling her fingers around the edge of Ren's plate.

Ren flinched as if he were pulled out of a daze and looked up at Ran, scrambling to give her his plate. He bit his lip and glanced down at his lap, brows furrowing.

Ran blinked at him curiously but took his plate anyway. She took it to Makoto who stood at the sink, already scrubbing at a pan.

"Do you guys have homework?" Makoto asked from the sink.

Ran groaned and leaned on the counter. "*Onii-chan*, can't we just watch a movie?" she whined.

Makoto turned to look at her, his brows furrowed.

"Ran, I start my new job in the morning," Makoto said.

Ren flinched at the sentence and shrunk in his seat, staring sadly at a spot on the table.

"Then, what about a show?" Ran asked. "Please, please, Onii-chan? We haven't watched a show together in a long time!"

Makoto paused in his scrubbing and considered Ran's proposal, his lip pulling into a small smirk.

"Only if you get your homework done first," he replied.

Ran leaned up from the counter, eyes wide and mouth open with a smile.

"Really?" she asked. When Makoto nodded fondly, she whirled around and rushed to Ren's side. "C'mon, Ren! Let's go!"

She grabbed his wrist and dragged him down from the table.

"Ah, wait, Ran!" Ren whined as he was pulled to their shared bedroom.

"Don't you wanna watch something with Onii-chan?" Ran asked as she pushed open the door and pulled them inside. She quickly rushed over to her books and placed them down on the table in the center of the room. "C'mon, you grab your books, too! I'm going to the bathroom first and then we'll finish our homework super fast!"

With a happy skip in her step, Ran left the room to hurry to the bathroom down the hall, leaving Ren to stand in the middle of the bedroom alone.

Ren relented with a heavy sigh, dragging his feet over to his backpack and digging through his books to find his English textbook. His fingers brushed something sharp in the bottom of his bag and he winced. His fingers maneuvered around it and pulled it out.

It was a broken colored pencil.

Ren grimaced, recalling the older kids from his art club.

"Oh, look! The crybaby just tripped!"

"You're right! I wonder if he's going to cry!"

Ren remembered leaning up from the floor of the art club room and looking down below him. He had fallen on his brand new pack of colored pencils, specially bought for him by his older brother.

When he had taken the pencils from the box, tears immediately sprang from his eyes.

Every colored pencil in the box had snapped in half.

"Wow, he really is *crying. And about colored pencils, too!"*

"Hey, crybaby! You can just ask your mom to buy new ones!"

"Yeah! Why don't you just ask her for some?"

Ren sniffed and dropped the pencil down on the floor, not wanting to ask Makoto for new pencils. He remembered showing the pencils to Makoto in the store, and his brother could not shake the shocked look that he had on his face when he saw the price.

But Makoto had saved up enough money to buy those pencils just for him.

Ren sniffled again, feeling his breath hitch and his throat close. He felt something wet slide down his cheeks and he furiously wiped them with his sleeve.

"Onii-chan! Ren is crying again!"

Ren stopped scrubbing his face, bowing his head to stare down at the textbook in his lap.

"I lost my job today."

He watched the tears fall from his eyes and onto the book below, each landing with a dull *plop.*

"I was late too many times."

A hiccup finally seized in Ren's chest and he gasped for air, desperately trying not to cry. He covered his eyes with his arm and leaned down over his book and the broken colored pencil.

It was my fault, Ren thought.

Onii-chan lost his job because of me.

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Did you trade it for something somewhere?

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! Another chapter for you :)
I appreciate the comments and kudos. You guys are awesome!

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Makoto glanced at himself in the mirror, grimacing.

It was all so… orange.

His new bright orange construction vest fit a little tightly over his chest. He wore an old, thick sweatshirt underneath and old jeans with work gloves tucked into his back pocket.

This is completely different than a suit, Makoto thought. He tried to smile at himself despite the ache in his chest. *At least I don't have to tie a tie.*

He took a deep breath and tugged on the vest one last time before leaving the bathroom.

"Ran, Ren!" Makoto called as he headed down the hall towards the front door. "We'll be leaving soon, so hurry up, okay? I want to get there—"

Makoto stopped in his tracks when he got to the living room.

Ren was waiting by the front door, already clad in his school uniform and his backpack on his back. His socked foot gently toed at his shoes that were sitting crookedly on the genkan.

"Ren?" Makoto called, cocking his head.

Ren startled at the doorway, head whipping around to see his older brother standing at the edge of the living room. Makoto could now see his puffy eyes and the dark circles that cradled them. Had he been crying again?

"Onii-chan," Ren greeted, his voice a little raspy. "G-Good morning."

Makoto blinked. "Ah… good morning. You're, uh… you're ready to go?"

Ren nodded mutely, his brown eyes dulled and his lips pulled into a tight line. His hands gripped the straps of his full backpack as he stared at his older brother.

"Is, uh…" Makoto scratched his cheek. "Is everything okay, Ren?"

Ren hesitated, blinking slowly before putting on a crooked smile. He nodded and then lowered his gaze back down to his shoes, waiting patiently.

Makoto's brows creased and he opened his mouth to speak, wanting to ask more, but he felt a nudge on his arm that pulled his eyes from the front door.

"I'm ready, too, Onii-chan!" Ran announced proudly as she gestured towards her school uniform.

Makoto smiled and nodded. "I can see that, Ran," he added, thankful his siblings were ready on time. "Do you guys have your bentos?"

Ren nodded from the genkan, holding up his green-wrapped bento, while Ran held up her red one.

Makoto nodded fondly, feeling the ache in his chest dull into a soft hum, and he headed back into the kitchen. He opened up the pantry and frowned. The barren shelves stared back at him in mild mockery, and the ache in his chest returned, along with a twist of hunger from his stomach.

With a heavy sigh, Makoto raked his hand through his hair. He knew there was some leftover chicken left in the fridge, along with a few veggies. He would just have to eat a few granola bars until he could go shopping. But he could not go shopping until he got his first pay, which he was still unsure of when exactly that would be and Ran and Ren needed their dinner and lunch and breakfast—

"Onii-chan?" Ran called from the front door.

Makoto jumped and slammed the pantry doors shut. He whirled around, quickly heading back to the front door and he put on a smile and rubbed the back of his head.

"Right, right," Makoto said. "Let's go."

"Okay, Tachibana. We're not gonna make you do any climbing or anything today since you have no experience. But we do have plenty of other jobs for you to do."

Makoto stood in front of his new boss in the cold work trailer. He remembered thinking about putting on an extra t-shirt to layer up, but he decided against it because the weatherman said it would be warmer today.

The weatherman lied.

So Makoto stood shivering in the trailer while his new boss handed him a yellow hard-hat and pointed out the window.

"There are about 200 bags of concrete mix that need to go to the mixer. Unfortunately, the delivery truck dumped them all on the opposite side of the site. Your first job today is to haul those bags over to the mixer on the other side of the site and pour them into the mixer if needed," his boss said.

Makoto puffed out a breath and nodded, placing the hard-hat onto his head.

"You remember the safety rules, right?" his boss asked, folding his arms across his chest. He continued before Makoto could answer. "You need to stay safe and keep your hard-hat on at all times. Don't go past the yellow tape; you're not needed there. If you see any falling objects, warn people immediately."

Makoto gulped and nodded, tugging on his orange vest.

"You'll get your first pay until Friday, even though it won't be much," his boss added, rubbing the back of his neck. "But it'll be something. Okay, I think that's it. Any questions?"

Makoto opened and shut his mouth like a gaping fish until he just decided to shake his head. His

boss seemed pleased and gave him a curt nod towards the door.

"Okay. Get to work."

Makoto gave a quick bow and then turned to leave the work trailer, stepping out into the cold air.

Boy, it was cold for fall.

He pulled on his thin work gloves—he could already feel his fingers turning raw from the cold—and headed out to where the bags of cement were resting. He eyed where the mixer was, roughly a good distance on the other side of the construction site.

After another quick glance back and forth, Makoto clapped his hands together and huffed out a quick breath of air, kneeling down to grab one of the bags. He hoisted the bag—*Wow, this is heavy. Why didn't he mention how heavy these were?!*—over his shoulder and started his trek across the site, dodging other workers with wheelbarrows and shovels.

After a few more heavy steps, Makoto finally reached the large, red mixer and plopped the bag of cement down on the ground with a dull *thud.* He heaved and stood up straight, feeling the slight strain on his back.

Lift with your legs, Makoto remembered his high school basketball coach telling him at weight training day. *Not with your back.*

"Yeah, yeah…" Makoto mumbled in response to his coach's words bouncing off in his head.

With another deep breath through his nose, Makoto turned back to walk to the other side of the construction site to grab another bag.

As he headed back towards the bags, there was a particular construction worker beyond the yellow tape lifting up a jackhammer from the ground and fixing it into place.

Makoto had not given it any thought until the man turned the jackhammer on.

A loud, banging noise immediately erupted from the ground, piercing Makoto's ears and instantly rattling his brain. He stopped in his tracks, wincing, and lifted a hand to his head, his hand fumbling when he felt the helmet covering his hair.

It's so loud, Makoto thought. *It's so…*

"We're so proud of you."

"We love you very—"

The loud crash.

The spinning of the world around him.

The bang, bang, *bang* of a car rolling and rolling until it skidded off the road and…

And his world was a blurry, upside-down picture.

"Ah, ouch," Makoto grumbled, massaging his head where it hurt the most. "It hurts…"

"Oi, newbie."

Makoto snapped his head up, realizing that the jackhammer had suddenly been turned off. He glanced around to see that the man on the jackhammer was now looking at him with a bored expression, save for the cocked brow.

"You okay?" he asked, taking a moment to wipe off his brow.

Makoto blinked at him, his eyes still slightly swirling from the sharp pain that pulsed in his head. He nodded and gave a quick bow.

"Yeah, sorry!" Makoto apologized and hurried off to the bags on the other end of the site before the man could respond.

You can do this, you can do this, Makoto told himself as he knelt down to grab another bag. *Do it for Ran and Ren.*

He pulled the bag over his shoulder and trudged across the construction site.

"Oi, we need those orders out right away!"

"Get those boxes out of the way!"

"We've got three new orders!"

…

…

…He's late.

"Man, the stock room is a mess. I can't find a thing in there!"

"You think we can find someone to organize all that crap?"

"Don't get any of the waiters to do it. They're lazy."

"Hey! We're not *that* lazy! C'mon, Haru-chan, tell them!"

He's usually passed by here by now.

So why hasn't he walked by, yet?

"Haru-chan?"

He seemed stressed the last time we spoke.

I think… he was crying.

"Helloooo, earth to Haru-chan!"

Did… something happen?

"Haru-chaaaaan!"

Haru snapped out of his reverie, his eyes drawn to the side to see magenta eyes staring back at him.

Nagisa stood on the other side of the pick-up table in the kitchen, across from Haru. His black

waiter's apron was askew over his hips and his sleeves were wrinkled. His lips were pursed and his head was cocked to one side as he stared at him.

"Hey, Haru-chan, you were spacing out again!" Nagisa said with a pout.

"Nagisa-kun, please be more respectful towards our boss."

Haru watched as Rei, one of the main hosts, walked next to Nagisa with a few menus in his hands. He glanced at Haru through his red glasses, his hand coming up to adjust them.

"Is everything all right, Nanase-san?" Rei asked.

Haru frowned and stared at Rei in slight disapproval.

"You can just call me 'Haru.' And everything is fine," Haru said, turning back to his dish. He put the finishing garnishes on the plate and then placed the order on the pick-up line, calling out to the waiter for the order.

"You were staring out the front windows again," Nagisa pointed out, and Haru felt his lip tug slighty in annoyance.

"Again? Did someone break your sign again, Nanas… H-Haruka…san?" Rei asked, fidgeting as he finally managed to spit out Haru's name.

Haru sighed at the name and shook his head.

"No, it's not broken again," Haru answered.

"Did you ever find the guy who broke it?" Nagisa asked, his eyes wide. He leaned forward, almost jumping up onto the counter and knocking a few plates. A few of the cooks in the kitchen glanced up to give him a flat stare. "I can help you find him!"

"Nagisa-kun, please calm down," Rei admonished quietly as he pulled back on Nagisa's collar.

"Rei-chan, you could help, too!" Nagisa said, not phased by his friend's warning.

"Don't you two have jobs to do?" Haru said as he placed another finished order on the pick-up table.

"We're on break!" Nagisa chirped loudly.

Haru hesitated, taking in both of Nagisa and Rei's expressions. He glanced out the front window again and sighed. He needed some air.

He turned to his assistant chef in the kitchen and handed him his orders.

"I'll be right back," Haru told him.

The chef hummed and nodded in response, taking the orders from Haru's hands and beginning to work on the new dishes.

"Eh? Where are you going, Haru-chan?" Nagisa asked as Haru passed him and headed out of the kitchen.

"Outside," Haru responded. Nagisa opened his mouth and took a step forward. "Don't follow me."

Nagisa stopped in his tracks and pouted, folding his arms across his chest.

Haru could faintly hear Rei saying something to placate the short blonde, but he ignored it and kept going, heading straight for the front door. He needed some space and breathing room to think.

I wonder if he moved, Haru thought as he put his hand on the door. *I guess he could have moved. Or maybe those two kids he's always with changed schools or something.*

Haru's brows furrowed at the thought and he scowled at the ground. He pushed the door open and started to step outside.

I don't remember those two kids. Were they always around back then? Or—

Suddenly, someone bumped into him.

Haru jolted back a step, feeling embarrassed about almost hitting someone with the door.

He really needed to install automatic doors.

Before Haru could apologize, the man was stumbling over his own apology.

"Oh, sorry!"

The voice made Haru's heart leap, and he snapped his head up. His eyes widened as he was met with the person he had been watching for all afternoon.

"I wasn't watching where I was—"

The man froze when he locked his eyes with Haru. His jaw dropped and his ears turned red as he eyed Haru and the restaurant.

Haru looked at him, his eyes soft. The man in front of him was wearing a bright orange vest over an old, worn sweatshirt and dirty jeans. There was grime on his face and his hair was a little out of place.

Haru's eyes narrowed slightly.

Where was his suit?

"You… changed jobs?" Haru asked instead of greeting him.

The man's eyes widened a little in surprise.

"Um… yes, I, uh… I did," he stuttered. "How, uh… how did you know?"

Haru blinked at him and pointed to his chest. "You usually wear a suit."

The man glanced down at himself to see the orange vest and worn jeans, and he glanced back up at Haru with a sheepish smile.

"A-Ah, yes, well…" he stuttered. "You noticed?"

Haru pursed his lips, tearing his eyes away for a brief moment. His fingers fiddled with the strap on his chef's uniform.

"You walk by the here every morning and afternoon. It's easy to notice these things," Haru said

simply. He felt a little embarrassed for saying so but tried not to show it.

"Oh," the man said. He chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck, still looking sheepish. "Right. Of course."

What happened to your old job? Haru wanted to ask, but he bit his lip and instead glanced at his vest again. He noticed the name of the construction company stitched into the breast of the vest.

"So, you're in construction now?" Haru asked, keeping his eyes on the vest.

The man hesitated, his fingers tugging on his vest. He nodded glumly and hummed.

"Yeah," he answered. "Today was my first day, actually."

Haru's brows pushed together and he stared at the man curiously. His body looked fatigued and his usually bright green eyes had dulled, their color faded.

And his smile appeared… off.

Your smile used to be so bright, Haru thought. *What happened?*

"Is…" Haru bit his lip, wanting to tread carefully. "Is everything oka—"

"Uwah! Sorry, I hate to run out on you again!" the man said as he glanced down at his watch. "I really must go to pick up my siblings. I'll be sure to get you the money for a new chalkboard sign."

Haru's brows dropped low over his eyes, feeling them twitch in annoyance.

That stupid sign again.

"I said it was fine—"

"See you later!" the man said, waving as he rushed off down the sidewalk.

Haru stared at his retreating form, his lip pulled back in a crooked frown. He glanced down at the ground where the man had once stood, his hands curling into loose fists.

Maybe he's not the right guy, Haru thought. *But… he looks just like him.*

Does he… not remember me?

"Ran, Ren, did you both make sure your room was clean?"

"Yes, Onii-chan."

"We checked over it a thousand times!"

Makoto bit his lip as he finished chopping up the last of the carrots for Ran and Ren's lunches. His hands were worn and covered in calluses from the work he had done all week at his new job. He was thankful it was almost the weekend, but his heart was stuttering with anxiety for the day.

"You're sure you cleaned? What about the bathroom?" Makoto asked as he placed the carrots into the twins' bentos.

Ran nodded haughtily, her hands on her hips, while Ren twiddled his thumbs.

"We made sure everything was clean," Ran announced.

Makoto breathed out deeply as he moved on to grab a few cookies for their lunches. His hands shook as he placed them inside and he felt his stomach twist in an angry pang of hunger.

He could not remember the last time he had a proper meal.

"Who is coming again, Onii-chan?" Ren asked, his eyebrows upturned in worry.

Makoto snapped out of his hungry daze and glanced at his younger brother.

"O-Oh," Makoto said stiffly. "Social Services is sending someone to inspect our home today."

"A social worker?" Ran asked.

Makoto nodded as he tied up Ran and Ren's bentos, his stomach releasing another persistent growl.

"Now, she should come around dinnertime, so you'll have to be ready to go home right after your clubs today," Makoto said as he handed them their bentos. "And you need to be on your best behavior tonight. Understand?"

Both of the twins nodded, offering kind smiles.

"We will, Onii-chan!"

"Good afternoon, Tachibana-san."

Makoto blinked at the two people at the doorway of his hospital room. The man was dressed in a suit while the woman was dressed in nice slacks and button-up shirt.

Makoto sat up in his bed, wincing when he moved his head too much.

"Ah, don't strain yourself," the man said, approaching Makoto's bedside. "My name is Ito Jun and this is Sato Aiko. We're both from Social Services."

Makoto's hands gripped his sheets, but he managed to slightly bow his head in greeting.

"We are terribly sorry for your loss, Tachibana-san," Ito said, giving a sympathetic smile.

Makoto's chest constricted and his chin wobbled dangerously at his words and he bit his lip to prevent any tears. He took a deep shuddering breath and mumbled a quiet 'thank you.'

"Sorry to be blunt about all this, Tachibana-san, but we really must discuss this today," Ito said. "When we called yesterday, you mentioned that you wanted to take care of your younger siblings?"

"Y-Yes," Makoto answered, looking into the man's eyes.

Ito nodded and gestured towards Sato, who stood next to him with a stern gaze.

"Sato will be your designated Social Worker unless we reassign you a new one," Ito explained. "She will go over all of the requirements that you will need to take care of Ran and Ren."

Makoto nodded, watching Ito give a short bow and then walk out of the hospital room. As soon as he was gone, Sato approached Makoto's bedside and took some forms from her bag, handing them to Makoto.

"Here are the requirements," Sato said frankly. "Please go over these forms and fill them out completely. We will need all of the information in order to process that your siblings will be under the care of an adult."

Makoto gulped as he flipped through page after page of regulations and requirements, names and addresses, and plenty of forms that he needed to fill out.

"You do have a place of residence, correct?" Sato asked.

Makoto jumped, looking up at Sato. "Yes. I have an apartment in Tokyo."

"Tokyo," Sato repeated. She hesitated and then nodded. "All right. Is it up to code?"

"Code?"

Sato sighed lightly and adjusted her glasses. "Meaning, does it have inspections regularly?"

"O-Oh, yes. The landlord has inspections done every month," Makoto stuttered.

Sato nodded, seeming to be satisfied with his answer.

"All right. Well, we will do a background check on you and make sure you have a salary that is sufficient for taking care of two children. Once you fill out these forms, we can get you processed immediately," Sato said, handing Makoto a pen.

Makoto took the pen gingerly and glanced down at the first form in his hand. It asked for his background as well as his occupation and place of address.

At the bottom of the form, there was a place for a signature, along with an agreement.

'I hereby agree that if I do not meet any of the requirements listed above, that my child(ren) will be in the custody of the Japanese Social Services.'

Makoto blanched, feeling his heart stutter. He glanced up at Sato with worried eyes.

"Um… Sato-san," Makoto called gently. "What does it mean by… being in the custody of the Japanese Social Services?"

Sato glanced at the bottom of the form to see the agreement and then looked back at Makoto with hollow eyes.

"It means that your siblings will go into foster care."

"Good work today, Tachibana!"

Makoto waved his limp hand in the air before heading inside the worker's trailer. He took off his helmet and set it down in his designated bin. Now that work was over, Makoto would have plenty of time to pick up the twins, shower, and even straighten up the apartment a bit. He could even possibly make tea for everyone.

Makoto reached down and grabbed his phone from his locker, his brow quirking when he turned it on.

1 Missed Call

1 New Voicemail

Makoto quickly searched through his missed calls list. His heart fluttered when he saw the Social Services contact at the top of the screen. They had called roughly two hours ago, but Makoto did not have his phone on him at the time.

Frantically, Makoto put the phone up to his ear to listen to the voicemail. His heart was pounding in his chest in an anxious dance as the phone went to his messages.

"Good afternoon, Tachibana-san. We are calling from Japanese Social Services to let you know of the time change for the visit today. Due to scheduling conflicts, the visit will take place at 4pm today instead of 6pm. We are sorry for the inconvenience."

Makoto quickly glanced down at his watch.

It was 4:10.

"No, no, no…" Makoto stuttered.

He shoved his phone into his pocket and ran out of the worker's trailer as fast as his legs could carry him.

Of all days to be early, it had to be today! Makoto thought as he turned a corner and headed for their apartment complex. He ran straight past the station, not bothering to ride the train, and decided to take a shortcut through some alleyways. After another few blocks of running with burning lungs, he finally reached the apartment building.

Maybe she'll be late, Makoto thought as he entered the front door of their apartment complex. He ran up the stairs, feeling his aching body protesting with each step.

Please just be late, Makoto thought. *Just for today. Please!*

His feet pounded on the steps as he started to the next floor, his eyes squeezing shut as he finally reached the proper floor. He swung the door open to his floor.

Please don't be here, please don't be here—

"Nice of you to finally grace me with your presence, Tachibana-san."

Makoto blanched at the voice and he opened his eyes wide.

There was a woman with black hair and glasses that stood in front of his door. She held a clipboard in her hands and she had a stern look on her face.

It reminded Makoto of a hawk.

And she was seeking her prey.

"A-Ah, Sato-san," Makoto greeted, rubbing his hands on his thighs. He quickly bowed once he realized how rude had been. "Um… nice to see you, again."

"Where are your siblings?" she asked, not acknowledging Makoto's greeting.

Makoto took a quick breath through his nose. "They're still at school. They had club meetings today."

Sato's brows creased at his greeting and her finger tapped against the clipboard impatiently.

"I see. Shall we go inside, Tachibana-san?" she asked.

Makoto straightened his back and nodded, rushing to the door. He pulled his keys from his pocket and stuck the key into the lock with shaking fingers. He noticed how dirty his hands were and he cringed, sincerely hoping that Sato would look over that.

"C-Come in," Makoto said with a shaky smile.

Makoto opened the door wide for Sato and quickly shuffled the messy stack of shoes out of the genkan.

"Sorry for the mess," Makoto apologized as he shucked off his work boots from his feet. "W-Would you like some tea or coffee?"

"That won't be necessary," Sato said. "I just need to do a search of the apartment and then I'll ask some questions."

Makoto's smile twitched on his face but he hummed and nodded politely.

"I, uh… I'm just going to go clean myself up," Makoto said. "Sorry, I just got here from work."

Sato nodded at him, her face expressionless, and she turned to head into the kitchen.

Once she was gone from sight, Makoto hurried to grab his clothes from the hall closet and went into the bathroom to change and rub off the dirt from his arms and hair. He splashed his face with water and then stared at himself in the mirror, taking deep, slow breaths. His head still throbbed as he left the bathroom and headed out to the hallway.

Suddenly, Makoto felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, his eyes widening when he saw the caller ID.

Incoming Call:

Sousuke

Makoto's stomach twisted into knots.

He must have found out about my job at the marketing firm, Makoto thought. *Shoot, he's going to be so angry and worried and he's going to want to drop everything just to be here and he's worked too hard to get where he is and—*

The sound of the door down the hallway clicking shut rapidly pulled Makoto out of his thoughts.

He whipped his head to the side to see Sato leaving the twins' bedroom. Makoto immediately stiffened. He quickly ignored Sousuke's call and shoved it into his pocket, butting himself against the wall as Sato stopped in front of him.

"Okay, Tachibana-san," Sato started. "Let's go have a seat and chat, okay?"

Makoto gulped and nodded with a tight squeak leaving his throat. He followed Sato into the living room, quickly straightening out his pillow and blanket from when he sleeps at night and sat down across from her.

"Well, I have a couple of questions, Tachibana-san," Sato said.

"O-Of course," Makoto said, wincing when his voice cracked.

Sato nodded and flipped some of the pages on her clipboard.

"I see you came home in an orange vest," Sato started.

Makoto tensed, his fingers gripping each other in his lap. He braced for her next question.

"Are you doing some work on the side along with your job at the marketing firm?" she asked.

Makoto felt his chest tighten and he released a breathy puff of air.

"A-Ah, w-w-well…" Makoto swallowed shakily. "They, uh… they let me go last week."

Sato's gaze snapped up from her clipboard and stared incredulously at Makoto. Her pen froze in her grasp and she peered at Makoto over her glasses.

"I see," she said. "And you're now doing… construction?"

"Y-Yes," Makoto answered. "As a… a day laborer."

Sato pursed her lips and wrote down some things on her clipboard, making Makoto squirm. After a moment, she glanced back up at Makoto with piercing eyes.

"So, is the bedroom in the back the only bedroom this apartment has?" Sato asked.

Makoto jumped at the sudden shift in questioning and he nodded jerkily.

"Y-Yes, it's a one-bedroom apartment," Makoto answered.

"And *three* people live here?"

Makoto bit his lip *hard.*

"Um…"

"I'm assuming both Ran and Ren sleep in that room in the back?" Sato asked, already moving on.

Makoto could not find his voice past the lump in his throat and he simply nodded, lowering his gaze to look at the coffee table. That coffee table had been handed down from his parents. He remembered how excited they were when they helped moved him into the apartment, both of them beaming and ready for him to start at the university.

Makoto's shoulders sagged. He wanted to seep through the floor.

Mom, Dad, Makoto prayed. *I could really use your help right now.*

"All right, Tachibana-san."

Makoto snapped his head up to look at Sato, who had finished flipping through her clipboard.

"Firstly, your current job is not something that is safe enough for you to take care of your siblings," Sato said.

Makoto's back stiffened and his hands gripped his knees.

"What do you mean?" he managed to ask.

Sato rested her clipboard down on her lap and adjusted her glasses over her nose.

"Tachibana-san, construction is not a stable job, especially as just one of the laborers. You could easily get injured or fired. And then what?" she asked. "Who would take care of Ran and Ren then?"

Makoto's lips pulled back into a grimace and he glanced down at the floor between his feet.

"I'm… I'm not sure," he answered.

Sato nodded. "That's what I mean. Now, I can understand if you needed this job to make ends meet for now… I saw the state of your kitchen and fridge."

Makoto hunched over, bowing his head lower to avoid her gaze. His cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

"But," Sato continued. "You'll need to find a more stable job. Something with a better pay and safer working conditions. I will give you two weeks to find a new job. Do you understand?"

After releasing a shaky breath that he did not even know he was holding, Makoto nodded, feeling his body slump even more in the chair.

"Good," Sato said, standing to her feet. She grabbed her clipboard, Makoto scrambling to his feet to see her out.

"One more thing, Tachibana-san," Sato said at the door.

Makoto looked at her with a timid posture, his hands finding each other in front of him. He did not bother with smiling to try and please her anymore.

"Yes, Sato-san?" Makoto asked politely.

"You need a bigger apartment," Sato said as she adjusted her glasses.

Makoto's shoulders immediately tensed up to his ears. His eyes quickly darted around his tiny apartment, the sinking realization that Sato was right. The apartment was too small for three people.

"I understand that you'll need to find a new job that will support a bigger apartment, so I will give you two months to find a new place," Sato said.

The pain in Makoto's head was beginning to be relentless, feeling as if it was splitting open. He quietly nodded and hummed, looking down at the genkan and watching her adjust the heels on her feet.

"I do hope you are aware of the consequences if these standards aren't met. Right, Tachibana-san?" Sato asked.

Makoto tried to swallow down the ache in his chest. He almost reached up a hand to rub it, but he flinched his hand back to his side.

"Yes, Sato-san," Makoto said.

"Good," Sato agreed. "Thank you for allowing me into your home. Have a good evening."

"Ah, y-yes. You, too," Makoto said lamely.

He closed the door shut behind her and leaned his forehead against it, his hands curling into frustrated fists. The ache in his chest turned sharp and piercing and his pulse roared in his ears.

It suddenly became a struggle to breathe.

I don't want to lose them, Makoto thought.

His limbs started to tremble, his legs shaking. His vision swirled as he leaned his whole weight against the door, struggling just to stay on his feet.

"It means that your siblings will go into foster care."

"No," Makoto whispered against the door. It felt cold against his forehead. "I can't lose them."

"We love you very mu—"

"I can't lose them, too…" Makoto mumbled, desperately trying to hold back the tears.

A shudder ripped through Makoto's body as the sobs rose in his throat.

"Mom… Dad… what do I do *now?"*

Makoto slowly slid to the floor, his forehead resting against the cold door.

"*What do I do?"*

Chapter End Notes

In case you guys were wondering, I was inspired by OneRepublic's "Say (All I Need)" for the title and the titles for each chapter. Check it out!

Come find me on Tumblr!

Do you know what your fate is?

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! Another chapter for you!
Thank you for the 50+ kudos, I'm so honored and happy you are enjoying this! :)

Happy reading~

This chapter was edited by the lovely Tayu-Chan!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a playground.

And… a sandbox.

He had been playing in the sandbox.

Right?

He was young. Just a kid. Maybe five? Six?

There was something the other kids wanted to go see and he wanted to see, too.

He got up to follow them.

"Wait—"

And…

"OOF!"

…he tripped.

Face stinging and covered in sand, tears sprung to his eyes. He was too worried about the inevitable crying that would ensue to even get up. He needed his mom, his dad. Where were they? Were they not right by his side just a moment ago?

Mom, Dad… I—

Suddenly, there was someone standing in front of him, their tiny shoes sinking into the sandbox.

His tears paused in their trek to leave his eyes as he gazed up at the mysterious person in front of him.

The person's head and eyes were blurry, unable to see anything clear in the blazing sunlight. They had extended a hand down to him. Their mouth was also moving, but he could not hear what they were saying.

What were they saying?

He squinted his eyes to read the lips.

"Are you okay?"

Makoto's eyes groggily opened, his mind a haze from the all-too-real dream. It was all so… familiar.

He moved his head and then immediately hissed. His spine ached and his back was so cold that it felt numb. That was when he realized he was still huddled against the front door with his knees pulled to his chest.

Did I… fall asleep here? Makoto thought, looking around his apartment from the floor. *What was I doing here on the—*

"I do hope you are aware of the consequences if these standards aren't met. Right, Tachibana-san?"

Makoto's brows pushed together as the memories of earlier that day came flooding back in an instant.

He sniffed and finally released the death grip he had on his legs, allowing himself to stretch out. His body felt as heavy as a hundred of those cement bags he had lugged around all day, but it still did not compare to the heaviness that sat on his heart. He knew that Sato was just trying to make him aware of his situation, but he could not help but feel as if he were being mocked.

But he did not have time to dwell on this. He had to find a new job and a new apartment all for Ran and Ren.

Ran and Ren…

Makoto's chest seized in his chest and he whipped his head up to look at the clock in the living room.

"Oh, *no,*" Makoto whispered.

Ran and Ren's clubs had finished over an hour ago.

"*Shoot!"* Makoto shouted, jumping to his feet and scrambling to get his coat on his shoulders while stuffing his feet into his shoes.

He rushed out the door, still pulling his arm through the sleeve of his coat, and hurried down the sidewalk to get to the school.

Ugh, how could I fall asleep like that?

Makoto berated himself as he turned the corner. He lowered his gaze as he dodged the few pedestrians on the street, all gasping as he passed by. The sun had started to set against the horizon, splashing an array of orange and purple hues in the sky.

How could I be so stupid?

Makoto could finally see the gate to the middle school just a stretch ahead. So he ducked his head

and sprinted the last few steps, skidding to a halt in front of the gate and hunching over on his knees, panting wildly.

I hope they're not upset, he thought as he struggled to breathe. *Please be okay, please be okay, please be—*

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto snapped his head up from his hunched position, his body aching and back sore, and stared at the angry face of his little sister.

Ran had her hands balled into shaking fists, her bag tossed down by her feet. Her brows sat low over her bluish-green eyes and her mouth was twisted into a harsh scowl.

"You're late!" she shouted angrily.

Makoto jolted, straightening his back. His hands curled into tight fists by his sides as he stared down at his younger sister.

"Ran," Makoto whispered, the words unable to form.

"You told us to be ready!" Ran yelled. "You told us to be ready to go right after our clubs, and we *were!"*

Makoto winced, his eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"I-I… Ran, I—"

"Onii-chan…"

A small trembling voice squeaked by Ran's feet, and Makoto tilted his head to see his brother.

Ren was sitting on the ground behind his sister, his nose and cheeks red and wet as tears spilled from his eyes. He was shaking and holding his knees to his chest. He looked traumatized.

"*Onii-chan,*" Ren said again, more agonizing tears falling down his cheeks. His chest started to hitch as his breaths quickly turned into hiccups. "I-I thought you were, were… weren't coming b-*back."*

Makoto's heart broke at his quiet wail, shattering into cold pieces inside his chest. His chin trembled as he heard his brother let out another sob, his hands desperate to wipe the tears away.

"I thought th-that you were gone… like Mom and Dad," Ren whimpered.

Makoto felt his breath hitch and his eyes widened, guilt settling like a rock in his stomach. He took a step forward, ready to pat Ren on the head to console him. But before he could even take another step, Ren took in a loud, sharp breath, making Makoto jump.

"I w-w-was s-so… *s-scared!"* Ren cried.

And that was the final blow to the dam, the waves of pure agony and pain gushing out as tears from Makoto's eyes.

He was on his knees beside his siblings in an instant, wrapping them both up in his arms and pulling them to his shoulders. He held them tight, not wanting either one of them to see his crying face.

"*Sorry,*" Makoto whispered with a quivering voice. "I'm *sorry."*

Ran and Ren froze in his grasp, both of them trying to twist their heads to see their brother's face. But Makoto held them tighter, forcing both of their faces into the crooks of his neck.

"O-Onii-chan?" Ran called softly, her hot anger immediately doused.

"I'm so, *so* sorry," Makoto repeated.

When Makoto finally let go of them, his tears had dried and his eyes were puffy and red, but he smiled and patted his siblings' heads. Ran and Ren were staring up at him, both with bewildered expressions on their faces.

"Onii-chan, what happened?" Ran asked quietly.

Makoto felt his lip quiver slightly but he tightened his smile to hide the pain.

"Nothing," Makoto lied. He stood up straight and turned around, nodding his head towards the sidewalk. "Ready to go home?"

Ran and Ren stood silently, both studying their brother. Even Ren's tears had ceased. When Makoto had started to walk down the street, they hurried after him, looking at the hunch in his shoulders.

What do I do about dinner? Makoto thought to himself.

All they had in the apartment were some snacks. And Makoto's paycheck would not register in his bank account until later that evening when the grocery stores would be closed.

His forced smile fell from his face and he glanced down at the sidewalk in front of his feet. Tears started to glisten in his eyes again and he held his breath to calm the stutter in his lungs.

What am I going to do? I can't let them go hungry. He thought. He squeezed his eyes shut and his nails dug crescents into his palms.

This is all my fault. If I hadn't been late so many times, then I wouldn't have lost my job. Then I would be able to afford food for them, and maybe even a bigger place.

He took more painful steps, feeling his shoulders start to shake. He noticed how quiet Ran and Ren had been, and more guilt poured into his stomach.

Idiot, Makoto berated himself. *You made them worry.*

He walked by the front of a building, being careful to avoid the doors that had opened as he passed by.

I have to make sure they don't have to worry. They just entered junior high, they're too young to have to worry about food. Now they're going to—

"Whoa, are you a chef?!"

"Um…"

Makoto froze, his eyes popping open at the sound. He whirled around and his eyes widened.

It was that chef again, his hand still on the door as he stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Do you work here?" Ran asked excitedly.

Makoto's heart jumped and he glanced up at the building in front of him. He saw the words *Nanase Rest House* overtop the double doors of the building.

"Um…"

Makoto glanced back to see the chef staring down at his excitable siblings, looking a little lost. The chef nodded slowly and hummed at their question.

"Yes," he added.

"No way!"

"So cool!"

Makoto could see the chef glance at him out of the corner of his eye with a curious expression. Then, the chef fully turned to look at Makoto, his eyes a little wide. Makoto could see the vibrancy in his eyes, the deep blue seeming to sparkle with the orange hues of the setting sun.

"Are you okay?" the chef asked.

"Are you okay?"

Makoto winced, a hand coming up to rub his head. The voice sounded like something from a memory, but it was distant and gone in an instant.

What was that? he asked himself.

"Hey, hey! Do you make the meals on this chalkboard?"

Both Makoto and the chef turned to see Ran tugging on the chef's white uniform and pointing to the chalkboard sign.

Ah, that sign, Makoto thought, his brows furrowing. He hung his head and stared at the ground. *I still need to pay for that.*

"Um, yes," the chef answered.

"Wow, really?!" Ren asked, looking at the board with a smile on his face. "Then, you made all of these today?"

The chef nodded mutely, making Ran and Ren grin. They glanced over to Makoto with wide eyes, no longer looking at him with suspicion and worry.

"Onii-chan, can we have dinner here?" Ran asked.

As if on cue, Ren chirped cheerfully, "Yeah, can we?"

Makoto's jaw dropped, his chin quivering slightly. He glanced at the chef and then back to his siblings, who were both giving him pleading looks.

"Please, please, *please?"* Ran begged. "I did well on my test!"

"A-And we got to school on time today," Ren added as he shyly fiddled with the straps of his backpack.

"And we even waited longer for you and didn't mess around, just like you told us to!" Ran chirped. "So, can we eat here as a reward, Onii-chan?"

"Please?" Ren asked, his eyes looking more joyful.

Makoto's heart had had enough.

Seeing those hopeful eyes staring up at him made him queasy. And his wallet was burning a hole so hot in his pocket that he thought he would catch on fire.

Even if the paycheck had come in this morning, Makoto thought. *It still wouldn't be enough to buy one meal here, let alone three.*

He sighed gently and shook his head at them, his eyes drooping and shoulders sagging.

"Sorry, guys," Makoto said. As soon as the words left his mouth, he saw his siblings deflate like a popped balloon. "We…" Makoto risked a glance at the chef, seeing that he was still standing there, and lowered his voice to a shamed whisper, "…we can't afford the food here. We have to eat at home."

With what food? Makoto asked himself, mentally kicking himself for being such a poor caretaker.

"Eh?!" Ran whined loudly, and Makoto jumped at the intensity of her voice. "But, Onii-chan! You've been saving!"

Makoto's cheeks were hot as he risked another glance to the chef, who was now staring at Ran with wide eyes. Makoto scratched his head, incredibly mortified. He just wanted to crawl into a hole and live there forever.

Why can't Ran keep her voice down?!

"Sorry," Makoto said again, unsure of what to say. "C'mon, guys. I'm sure this chef has a lot of orders to fill, so we can't be bothering him anymore."

Makoto stepped towards them and gently grabbed their shoulders to pull them forward. He glanced at the chef and gave a pitiful smile, his eyes tearing up from all of the emotions that had run through his system.

"I'm really sorry for disturbing you," Makoto apologized with his watery smile.

He tried to tilt his head and give his best smile, but the chef just looked at him with wide, concerned eyes.

He probably thinks I'm insane! Makoto thought hysterically. He reached up to wipe away a tear that had escaped his eye and turned his head back to his siblings to distract his mind and hide his face.

"Ran, Ren, let's go," Makoto said lowly, and his siblings' jaws dropped in shock.

"B-But!"

"Ah, Onii-chan!"

Makoto pulled them a few steps forward, wincing when as he heard their cries of protest. He swallowed down the embarrassment as best as he could and grabbed them by their wrists. He turned around and started to walk away.

"Wait."

Makoto stopped in his tracks, hearing the soothing sound of the chef's voice behind him. He sheepishly turned around to peer into blue eyes.

The chef fiddled with his uniform, his fingers tugging on the silver buttons on the side. He pursed his lips and averted his eyes before making eye contact with Makoto.

"Wait… wait here," the chef said abruptly.

And with that, the chef disappeared back inside the restaurant.

Makoto stood frozen in place, his hands still gently wrapped his siblings' wrists. He blinked at the double doors of the restaurant.

"Eh?" he squeaked aloud.

What? What, what, what?! Makoto thought. He glanced around, wondering if the chef had been talking to someone else instead, but he found the sidewalk void of any other pedestrians.

"Where's he going, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, pulling her hand from his brother's loose grasp.

Makoto stood, dumbfounded and confused. He shook his head slowly.

"I'm not sure," Makoto answered.

"Is… is he mad at us?" Ren asked, clinging to Makoto's hand instead of pulling away.

Makoto glanced down at Ren briefly, seeing the fear in his eyes, before looking back at the restaurant.

Was he mad? Should they just… leave?

Before Makoto could have any more time to think about it, the chef reappeared at the door with a sturdy paper bag in his hand. The bag had the words *Nanase Rest House Takeaway* printed on the side. It even had sturdy handles.

"Here," the chef said, offering the bag to Makoto.

Makoto stared at the bag for a moment before hesitantly reaching forward and grabbing it with creased brows. He opened up the bag slightly to see a few black takeout containers.

They were warm and smelled *heavenly.*

Ran and Ren's eyes had practically bugged out of their skulls, their mouths watering.

"There are some meals in there, a little variety of the specials we served today," the chef explained. He pursed his lips and turned his gaze to stare at the chalkboard display. "And I put a dessert in there, too."

"Ah," Makoto said intelligently, his eyes glancing over to see the prices on the chalkboard. He would not be surprised if his wallet had disintegrated into ash in his pocket. "I, uh… I can't… *afford this,"* Makoto said in a sheepish whisper.

Makoto tried to hand the bag back but the chef put up a hand and shook his head.

"No, you don't have to pay for it," the chef said, his eyes soft.

Makoto paused for a second, letting the words sink in. Once it had registered what the chef was doing, he sputtered, almost dropping the bag.

"Y-You can't be serious! W-W-We can't just *take* this!" Makoto said, trying to hand back the bag again. "It's not right! Especially since I haven't even paid for your sign."

The chef sighed while Ran and Ren looked at him as if he had grown three heads.

"Sign?" Ren echoed.

"What sign, Onii-chan?" Ran asked.

Makoto pulled his lip to the side in a grimace and gave the twins a look as if to say, *Not now*.

"I told you," the chef said, pulling Makoto's gaze back to focus on him. "You don't have to pay for the sign. Just like the food."

The chef nodded towards the bag that was hanging loosely in Makoto's hands. Makoto glanced down at the food again and bit his lip, the guilt swirling nervously in his stomach.

"But—"

"I'm giving it to you."

Makoto snapped his head back up to look at the chef, his blue eyes never wavering. The chef was no longer fidgeting. Instead, he looked firm and steady with his hands by his sides.

"Take it. Consider it a gift," the chef said.

Makoto glanced down at the bag, his chest feeling as warm as the food. His burning pocket suddenly felt cool again but his eyes pricked with tears. He blinked rapidly to try and prevent any from spilling.

They had… food.

Warm food.

Food that was guaranteed to be delicious.

Makoto did not have to panic to find food for his siblings for the night. He could even probably save this food for the next day!

He looked up at the chef with a wide smile on his face. He felt tears gather at the corner of his eyes, a few of them dropping down his cheek.

"I don't know how I could ever repay you," Makoto chuckled. He tilted his head and tried to smile as wide as he could. "Thank you!"

The chef's eyes widened at his words and he suddenly looked flustered, his body frozen stiff.

Makoto tried his best to look as happy as he felt, but judging by the look on the chef's face, he must have looked crazy. Frantically, Makoto reached up to wipe the tears from his face.

"Onii-chan?" Makoto could hear the worry in his brother's voice.

"What's wrong?" Ran asked, a little more boldly.

Makoto dropped his hand from his eyes and glanced at the two of them, offering a wide smile. He gently shook his head at them and then turned back to the chef, who was still eyeing him carefully. Makoto suddenly bent at the waist and bowed deeply to the chef.

"Ah, Onii-chan…" Ran whispered, tugging on her older brother's sleeve to try and make him stand upright.

But Makoto stayed lowered to the chef, with his chest burning with eternal gratefulness.

"Thank you *so much*."

After a few more bows and promises to make it up to the chef, Makoto and his siblings' took their leave and headed back to their apartment. He quickly set the dinner table and opened up the black takeout containers. Steam immediately flooded into the air and rose to the ceiling.

All three of them closed their eyes and took in a slow, deep breath through their noses.

"*Wow*," Ran said dreamily.

"It smells so good!" Ren said, glancing up at Makoto.

Makoto smiled fondly at them and nodded. He glanced back down at the food to really study it, his eyes lighting up when he realized what exactly it was.

It was curry. And not just any curry, but *green* curry.

Makoto's absolute favorite.

His mouth watered at the sight and he hurried to portion out the food onto three plates, giving the two with the bigger portions to Ran and Ren.

With impeccable patience, the three of them all sat down and chirped, "Itadakimasu!"

Then, they all took their chopsticks and dug in, grabbing a portion of rice along with some of the delicious curry.

As soon as the flavor hit Makoto's tongue, he froze, his eyes widening and his heart thumping loudly in his chest. He chewed slowly and then swallowed it, staring down at his plate of food.

It… It tasted like…

"It tastes like how Mom used to make it…"

Makoto snapped his head up to see Ren's quivering eyes staring down at his own plate. He had tears in his eyes but his lips were pulled in a flat line, looking determined not to cry. He glanced up at Ran and Makoto with a fierce expression, his chin wobbling slightly.

"Right?" he asked, looking hopefully at Makoto.

Makoto's heart broke again for the thousandth time that day. His nose tingled as tears gathered in his own eyes and he smiled fondly at his brother.

"You're right," Makoto said with a nod. He sniffled quietly and returned to his meal.

You're exactly right, Makoto thought as he swallowed another mouthful.

It was the tastiest meal they had consumed in five months, and they ate every bite that night.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

The boy dusted off his knees and then wiped the sand that had stuck to his chin. He still had tears gathered at the corners of his eyes but he looked up at Haru with a wobbly smile.

"I-I'm okay," he answered in a small voice. "What's your name?"

Haru blinked for a second, his eyes focusing on the glistening tears pooled in the boy's green eyes.

"Nanase… Haruka," Haru said, wincing slightly at the sound of his own girly name.

The boy brightened, his eyes widening.

"Oh, what a coincidence! Someone who has a girly name like me!" he said, looking excited.

Haru hesitated and wondered about the boy's name. Was it really girly like his?

"Ah, well… You can just call me Haru," he said, not wanting to hear the girly name.

"Mmn! Okay!"

Haru focused back on the boy, still some residual tears in his eyes that did not match the smile on his face. The boy tilted his head and widened his smile, closing his eyes and letting a stray tear fall down his cheek.

"Thank you for helping me, Haru-chan!" the boy said.

Haru's eyes widened. This boy had almost been in tears just a moment ago. How was he acting so bright and happy right now?

"What's your name?" Haru blurted.

The boy's face fell slightly at Haru's bluntness, but he quickly recovered, giving Haru a cute smile.

"Oh, right! Sorry, Haru-chan. My name is…"

Haru startled awake with a sharp intake of air.

The dark ceiling of his bedroom greeted him as his vision cleared, and he realized that he was no longer a five-year-old living back in Iwatobi.

After a few deep breaths, Haru glanced over at the clock to see that it was still early in the morning, well before he had to be at the restaurant. With a light groan, Haru sat up on his bed and rubbed his face.

The dream had been too real to be just a dream. It had to have been something from his memory.

"Thank you for helping me, Haru-chan!"

Haru covered his eyes with the palm of his hand.

Still can't remember his name, he thought. *Maybe it's not the same person. There are people out there who have lookalikes.*

Haru's brows furrowed and twitched.

But…

"Thank you!"

Haru's heart jolted at the memory of the man's bright, teary-eyed smile from earlier. He had the same thankful expression as the boy on the playground so many years ago— watery eyes, but the biggest smile he had ever seen.

He looks just like him. We were close friends back then, and I always wondered where he went.

Haru dropped his hand from his face and hung his head, staring into his lap sadly. He huffed out a long sigh and studied the patterns of the comforter on his bed.

But… doesn't he remember me?

"Tachibana! Your break is over, get back to work!"

Makoto jerked and dropped the newspaper in his hands, the flimsy papers scattering about on the floor of the work trailer. The "jobs" section landed upright on his foot, and he pursed his lips at the words on the page.

"Must have bachelor's degree and a minimum of two years experience."

Makoto kicked the paper away from him and sighed, hanging his head in his hands. It had been almost one week since Sato came and inspected the apartment and there were still no leads on a new job. It was starting to become quite the headache, both literally and figuratively. The stress of only having a week left to find a job was weighing heavily on his body, giving him some of the most painful headaches that he had experienced since the accident.

It made it hard to think.

"Tachibana!"

Makoto squeaked and scrambled to pick up the papers from the floor. He folded them as neatly as he could and placed them back into his assigned locker next to his phone. The screen lit up as soon as he placed the newspaper next to it.

Incoming Call:

Sousuke

Makoto winced. He had been ignoring all of Sousuke's calls this past week. Makoto had sent him a vague text earlier in the week saying he was busy, but that only produced even more persistent calls from Sousuke. And he even sent a threatening text.

From: Sousuke

I know you're not busy, Tachibana. Pick up the damn phone.

The text sent shivers down Makoto's spine. Sousuke only used his last name when he was angry. And he knew Sousuke was furious.

"TACHIBANA!"

Makoto flinched violently and slammed his locker shut, ignoring yet another one of Sousuke's calls. He rushed over to grab his hard hat, placing it on his head, and then walked back out into the construction zone.

His supervisor was waiting outside the door with an irked look on his face and his arms folded across his chest.

"Don't dally around, Tachibana! You've got work to do!" he barked.

"Yes, sir," Makoto said, his voice cracking.

His supervisor paused and placed his hands on his hips, pointing with his chin to a stack of building materials next to a shed in the corner of the site. There were some tools lying around a red toolbox on the ground.

"Take those tools to the men working on the frame on the west side of the building," he ordered.

Makoto nodded and lightly bowed his head, hurrying over to the supplies. He carefully balanced metal tools in his arms, along with pinching the red toolbox in between his fingers, and proceeded to the west side of the building.

When Makoto arrived, he saw some of the men standing on scaffolds and ladders, drilling a hole into a steel frame. He moved to place the tools on the ground, ready to turn back and see what other jobs he could do, when he heard his name.

"Oi, Tachibana!"

Makoto whipped his head up to see the men on the scaffold and ladder looking at him. The one on the ladder waved his hand at him and pointed to the ladder he was standing on.

"Hold the ladder for me, will ya?" he hollered. "I've got to drill this."

Makoto nodded mutely and jogged over to the ladder, grasping the cold edges and holding it firmly in place. The men up top thanked him gruffly before continuing to drill into the metal beam. Makoto watched them for a moment before lowering his head to stare at the ground.

His boots were dirty, he noticed.

He remembered his father helping him to buy those boots at the beginning of college when Makoto

volunteered to help build houses as a community service project. He remembered when he had rushed off out of the store, shouting back a quick 'thank you,' and then hurried off to be with his friends.

Makoto winced as the regret sank into his stomach. If he had spent more time with his father that day instead of his friends, would that have changed anything? Did his time away from his parents really affect how things were now?

Or was his choice to move away from home to go to school the cause of all of their problems?

Makoto grimaced, shutting his eyes tight.

He regretted, and regretted, and regretted *so much*.

If he could go back and change something, he would. He would trade his dreams and aspirations for them to be alive and well. He would give up everything he owned if it meant they could be back in his and the twins' lives.

Mom… Dad…

Makoto's hands lightly shook on the metallic frame of the ladder.

I'm so… so, sorr—

"**Tachibana, watch out!"**

Makoto's eyes snapped open at the sound of his name, but before he could even react, he felt a blunt object smack him in the back of the head, sending him falling to the ground.

His world spun and his head throbbed. The thought that he could actually be dying briefly crossed his mind and he reached up to touch his head. He felt slight relief when he realized that there was no blood.

For once, he was thankful for that ugly hard hat.

"Ah, damn it!"

"Crap, is he okay?!"

Makoto felt some hands on him, holding his shoulders and arms. He tried to open his eyes but the world spun so much that he thought he would puke.

"Tachibana, can you hear me?"

"What's going on? He's still conscious, right?"

"Does he need to need to go to the hospital?"

At the sound of those words, Makoto stiffened.

Hospital?

Wires and bandages.

White rooms and scrubs.

A morgue and a creepy doctor.

Body bags.

Two black body bags…

"N-No…" Makoto whimpered, startling the men around him.

He rubbed his temples gently and slowly began to open his eyes. He first saw a blurry mix of orange and yellow, and Makoto swallowed to keep the vomit from climbing up from his empty belly.

He shut his eyes tightly and then slowly opened them again. His vision cleared and he was able to make out the shocked faces of his coworkers. Makoto sighed in relief, his hand reaching up to rub the side of his head.

"Tachibana, you should go to the hospital," one of the workers said.

Hospital. It was that word again.

Makoto slowly shook his head, wincing only slightly when the pain turned sharp. He took a slow breath to ease the pain and glanced up at his coworkers.

"I'm okay," Makoto said softly.

His coworkers looked at him incredulously.

"Are you insane? You just got knocked in the head with a drill!" he shouted.

Makoto turned his head to see the large, heavy drill lying in the dirt just a few centimeters away. It had looked so small from down below, but now it looked huge.

He was *very* thankful for that ugly hard hat.

"That's what the hard hat is for," Makoto insisted with a light smile as he turned to look back at his coworkers.

He put his hands flat on the dirt beneath him and carefully pushed himself up to a sitting position. His world swirled for a moment and he shut his eyes again to block it out.

"We should get the boss."

"But if he heard that there was an accident, he'd have to report it! Then we could get investigated!"

Makoto opened his eyes and glanced back up at his coworkers, thankful that everything had stopped spinning. He offered another light smile and held up his hands.

"Really, guys. I'm fine," Makoto said, more firmly this time.

His coworkers all exchanged worried glances with each other before turning back to look at him.

"As long as you're sure…" one of them mumbled.

Makoto was about to nod but he stopped himself, his head feeling sensitive to every little movement. But he smiled and hummed, allowing his coworkers to help him to his feet.

Once he had assured them that he could still work, Makoto went back to carrying tools and equipment across the site. He moved slowly and counted each step, staying focused on the ground in front of him.

Each movement was painful and he had completely lost his appetite, not even wanting to think about the food he would have to scrounge up for dinner that night. If this headache did not go away, Ran and Ren would have to take his portion.

At least he did not have to worry about Ran and Ren going hungry that evening.

"Onii-chan, are you ready to go?"

Makoto's eyes slowly slid open to see two pairs of eyes staring back at him. He squinted at the light and then slowly sat up with a groan.

"What's wrong, Onii-chan? It's not like you to fall asleep at the table, especially at breakfast," Ran said.

Makoto blinked, his eyes bleary and head still throbbing from the incident the day before. He could see that the twins had both finished their breakfast and were ready to go to school.

"Sorry," Makoto mumbled. He instantly winced as the words left his mouth, the throbbing in his skull *piercing*. His stomach threatened to expel what little food he had eaten in the past two days.

"A-Are you okay?" Ren asked frantically.

"Maybe you should stay home today, Onii-chan," Ran suggested, a pout on her lips.

Makoto grimaced. He could not afford to miss even a single day of work. Payday was just a day away. He just had to make it until then so he could buy more food and maybe even some painkillers for the headaches.

"I'll be fine," Makoto said with a small smile. He pushed himself up from the dinner table and moved to the front door, the twins following him. "Let's go."

After they had put their shoes and coats on, Makoto led them out of the apartment. It seemed as though the headache would be persistent but not something that would distract him from work.

But as soon as they exited the apartment complex, the noise hit Makoto's ears like a freight train.

The foot traffic, the cars, the colors, the smells…

Everything was bombarding his senses and it made his head feel tight with pressure and pain.

Makoto took deep breaths through his nose and tried his best to ignore it. Instead, he tried to focus on keeping an eye on Ran and Ren as they crossed the street and walked inside the gate to their school.

"Bye, Onii-chan!" both Ran and Ren called as they hurried into the school grounds.

Makoto winced at their loud voices but gave a smile and waved. After a deep breath, he turned around and headed off towards the construction site.

"I do hope you are aware of the consequences if these standards aren't met. Right, Tachibana-san?"

Makoto winced and sighed, the headache growing worse and worse with each step.

I know that, Sato-san, Makoto thought. *But what choice do I have? I'm not qualified for any kind of job.*

Each step grew heavier, the concrete beneath his feet beginning to swirl. His breaths were shorter as his head became dizzier.

I have to find a new job, he thought.

He slowed even further, his stomach flopping with nausea.

I have to for… Ran and Ren and—

"Ugh!"

Suddenly, the pain in Makoto's head was overwhelming, pounding throb after pain throb into his skull. He stopped abruptly on the sidewalk and reached up to hold his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

What's… what's happening to me?

Makoto fell to his knees, still holding his head.

Ugh… It hurts…

There was a faint sound of a door opening next to him, followed by a shallow gasp.

"Hey, are you okay?!"

"Are you okay?"

Makoto tried to open his eyes to peer up at the familiar voice, but all he could see was a white blur. Why was this voice so familiar?

Why was it…

The edges of Makoto's vision started to fade and he lost his balance.

He completely collapsed onto the sidewalk.

There was another sharp intake of air and rapid footsteps. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Oi! *Oi!* Wake up!" the familiar voice called. "Hey!"

He could hear the voice calling him and calling him, but he did not respond.

Makoto let his eyes slide closed and his world faded to black.

Chapter End Notes

> I'm a huge lover of music. If you guys are, too, I would recommend listening to "Not Alone" from the Free! OST during the meal scene in this chapter.

Also, I don't know if any artists out there are reading this, but if you'd like to draw for this, please feel free to! If you do, share it with me!!

Come find me on Tumblr!

And are you trying to shake it?

Chapter Notes

*Phew, I did not think I would make it, but here we are!
So glad I could put up this chapter today. I was concerned that it wouldn't happen.

Huge shout-out to my editor, Tayu-Chan, who is a constant support through this whole process. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy day to edit this for me.

~Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oi! *Oi!* Wake up!"

Haru grabbed the man's shoulders and shook him lightly, his head lolling over to the side. The man's hands fell limp to the concrete and he let out a low groan.

"Hey!" Haru called, shaking his shoulder again.

The man let out another painful whine, his eyes remaining shut. Haru lifted his hand to his mouth and chewed on his thumbnail.

What in the world happened to him? He thought, glancing over the man's limp body. He saw no blood or bruising anywhere. He just remembered seeing the man clutching his head right before he collapsed. And now, he was lying on the ground, groaning.

Was he dying?

Haru removed his hand from his mouth and gently grabbed his arm, starting to slowly pull him up into a sitting position. The man's head hung and he fell forward and collapsed against Haru's chest.

"H-Hey!" Haru called, grabbing ahold of his shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

The man released a shuddering breath against Haru's chest, and Haru suddenly felt the cold air nipping at his skin. He needed to get this man inside.

But…

Haru wrapped his arms around the man's torso and tried to lift him, but he fell limp against him instead, nearly taking Haru to the ground.

…he was *big*.

"Hey, hey, Haru-cha—EH?!"

Haru whipped his head to see Nagisa standing in the doorway of the restaurant, his jaw dropped and eyes wide. It instantly sparked an idea in Haru's mind.

"Nagisa, go get Rei," Haru said, trying again to push the man upright.

Nagisa pointed a finger at the man, his voice going higher and higher as he became more frantic.

"W-What's going on?! Who is that? Is he—"

"Nagisa!" Haru hissed.

Nagisa squeaked at Haru's tone and straightened his back. He nodded mutely and quickly turned on his heel to go back inside the restaurant. Haru could hear him yelp a loud "Rei-chan!" as he disappeared behind the doors.

Haru sighed and shook his head. He knew that there was a rule about hiring friends and how it could be dangerous. He was starting to understand why.

A soft whine cut off Haru's thoughts and he glanced down to see the man's head resting on his shoulder. His breathing was labored and his eyes were squeezed shut. His lips were moving slightly, and Haru leaned down to hear him mumbling softly.

"Got to… get to work…" he murmured.

Haru's hands subconsciously squeezed the man's arms. Ever since Haru had seen him wearing that orange vest, he had suspected something had gone wrong. Whatever the situation was, Haru deemed it desperate.

"Nagisa-kun, I'm not done with the training Haruka-san assigned to me!"

Haru whipped his head to the front doors of the restaurant to see Rei being pushed out the door, floundering as he skidded to a halt.

"I really need to go back and—What is this?!" Rei gasped when he locked eyes with Haru.

Haru snapped out of his reverie and pulled one of the man's arms across his shoulders.

"Rei, help me get him inside," Haru said, wrapping an arm around the man's back.

"W-What?! Shouldn't we get help or—"

"We *will*," Haru snapped, making Rei stiffen. "But we have to get him out of the cold."

Rei visibly swallowed and then rushed over to Haru's side, grabbing the man's free arm and pulling it over his shoulder. They both carefully lifted the man to his feet, the man releasing another soft whine.

"Hurts…" he whimpered.

Haru winced, then moving his eyes to glance at Rei.

"Let's get him to my office," Haru suggested.

"Uh, y-yes, Haruka-san," Rei said.

With Nagisa holding the door open, Haru and Rei were able to carry the man inside the restaurant. Haru ignored the strange looks he received from the rest of his employees and guided the three of them to his office.

Of all the days to hold the monthly staff training, it had to be that morning.

Nagisa rushed ahead and opened up the door for them, Rei and Haru guiding the man to lie down on the couch. Haru knelt down by his side and lifted up a hesitant hand to touch the man's cheek. He felt clammy to the touch, yet cold. But there was no trace of warmth from a fever.

"Is he okay, Haru-chan?" Nagisa asked, looking over his shoulder at the man on the couch.

Haru shook his head and shrugged, keeping his eyes on the man. "I'm not sure."

A soft moan escaped his lips and he slowly turned his head. Haru's brows knitted, watching as the man's eyes scrunched together.

"Oh! Is he waking up?" Nagisa asked, leaning in closer.

Rei also stepped forward and leaned over Nagisa's shoulder to see the man slowly open his eyes.

"W-Where…" he started. Another soft hiss pushed through his teeth. "Where am I?"

As soon as the words were spoken, the man's eyes closed again and he released another low groan. Haru's chest tightened at how much his words had slurred.

"Should I call an ambulance, Haruka-san?" Rei asked, digging his phone out of his pocket and holding it up for Haru to see.

The man let out a strangled noise, his body stiffening. Haru eyed the man carefully before turning back to look at Rei. He opened his mouth, ready to tell Rei to call for help, when he heard a voice croak from behind him.

"N-No…"

"Wow, your sandcastle is great!"

Makoto looked at the amazing sandcastle that the other boy had made. It was detailed and even, the walls of the castle straight and precise. The boy had even added windows to the taller towers.

Makoto had never seen a better sandcastle in his life.

"How did you do that?" Makoto asked as he looked up at the boy.

The boy's face was fuzzy, blocked out by the glare of the sun. He could only see the boy's mouth moving slightly.

"It wasn't that hard," the boy had responded, turning back to smooth out the roof.

Makoto deflated a little, his tiny hands resting in his lap. He glanced over at his sorry attempt at a sandcastle and sighed. It ended up just being a lump in the sand—a lump that he would probably trip over again later.

"Mine will never look as good as yours," Makoto said with a sad smile.

He felt tears well up in his eyes and he sniffed loudly, but he kept a smile on his face. It wobbled, threatening to crack under the boy's quiet gaze.

The boy studied him silently for a moment, his hands frozen on his patch of sand. He scooted over next to Makoto and started scooping up some of the sand next to Makoto's castle.

"Huh?" Makoto squeaked in surprise. "What are you…"

"I'll help you," the boy said as he started to get the sand together.

Makoto's jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

"You will?!" Makoto asked, looking at the boy in astonishment.

The boy turned to him, Makoto still unable to make out his face, and nodded.

Makoto smiled brilliantly, his eyes widening in delight.

"Thank you so much!" Makoto started. "I really owe you one, …!"

Huh…?

What… was that?

Who was that boy? I said his name, didn't I?

Why couldn't I hear my own voice?

Was that a dream or…

"…help me get him inside."

Ugh… what?

Where…?

"W-What?! Shouldn't we get help or—"

"We *will*. But we have to get him out of the cold."

Oh. Yeah.

It is cold. Why is it cold? Am I outside?

Gah, my head. It… it… "Hurts."

"Let's get him to my office."

"Uh, y-yes, Haruka-san."

"Is he okay, Haru-chan?

…Haru-chan?

That… sounded familiar.

But… why?

"I'm not sure."

Who is that?

I've got to… see…

"Oh! Is he waking up?"

Makoto's eyes fluttered, a soft hum leaving his throat.

"W-Where…" Makoto started to open his eyes slightly to see a fuzzy ceiling. It swirled, making his stomach churn, and he immediately shut his eyes again. "Where am I?"

Makoto grimaced, realizing how much his words had slurred, and he released a soft groan from his throat.

"Should I call an ambulance, Haruka-san?"

The words hit Makoto's chest like a brick, clear and sharp. He inhaled sharply and choked, coughing to try and clear his throat. He forced his eyes open and glanced up at the blurry figures standing over him.

"N-No…" Makoto pleaded, his voice raspy. He moved a hand up to his head and leaned up a bit, fighting past the nausea that hit him when the room still spun. "Please. No… no ambulance. I… I don't want to go to the hospital."

The room had finally stopped spinning when he opened his eyes again, the three figures in front of him clearing. In that moment, Makoto was met with an overwhelming feeling of familiarity as he gazed into his rescuers' eyes.

A familiar shade of blue.

Makoto blinked. Once. Twice.

"You're… you're that chef," Makoto said.

"Uwah, he *is* awake!" the smaller boy with blonde hair chirped from behind.

"Nagisa-kun! Don't be so loud!" the other one with the glasses reprimanded.

Makoto's gaze lingered to the other two people in the room, finally noticing their presence. His vision struggled with fuzziness and he squinted to try and clear it.

He tried to push himself up into a sitting position but dizziness overtook him and he started to slump forward. But then he felt firm hands steadying his shoulders.

"Don't move around," the chef said, his hands gripping Makoto's shoulders.

"I'll call for an ambulance," the one with glasses said.

Another spike of panic rose in Makoto's throat and he snapped his head up to look at the man. He reached out his hand to stop him.

"No!" Makoto shouted. The three others in the room stared at him with widened eyes and Makoto's cheeks burned with embarrassment. He quickly readjusted his voice and lowered the volume. "Please. I'm all right."

The chef's fingers dug into his shoulders, drawing Makoto's attention back to his eyes. He had a

disapproving look on his face, and Makoto suddenly felt small.

"You collapsed on the sidewalk," the chef said sternly.

Makoto averted his eyes. His gut no longer swirled with nausea, but guilt replaced it.

How many people am I going to make worry? Makoto thought, biting his lip. First, it was Sousuke, then Ran and Ren, and now these complete strangers. Just how much of a burden would he be to people?

"I'm sorry for causing you trouble," Makoto apologized glumly. He glanced at the three of them, eyeing their uniforms, and then he bowed his head. "And you guys were probably busy, too. I'm so sorry."

"Now, now, don't be like that! We were just doing training!" the small blond chirped.

Makoto lifted his head to look at him. The boy's smile was contagious.

"Really?" Makoto asked, feeling his lips beginning to quirk into a relieved smile.

The blond boy nodded. "Yep! Our shifts don't start for another three hours!"

Makoto let himself smile, grateful that the boy tried to calm his nerves.

"Thank goodness," he started. "I was worried there that I might have… might have disturbed… your…"

A sudden thought overtook Makoto's mind.

Their shift did not start for another three hours.

Their shift.

Work.

Makoto's smile fell from his face as he scrambled to get his phone out of his pocket. He fidgeted slightly when he saw the three missed called from Sousuke—*Ugh, Sousuke was going to kill him*—and then his stomach dropped when he looked at the time.

He was late for work.

"Uwah! Is it really that time already?!" Makoto exclaimed. He dropped his phone into his lap and held his face in his hands. "My boss is going to kill me."

His boss already seemed to have it out for him, especially since he was new and inexperienced. But now, he's not even two weeks into the job and he's already late for work.

Would this be the second time he's fired from a job in a span of three weeks?

There was a moment of silence before the chef let go of Makoto's shoulders.

"Nagisa, Rei, you can go back to training," the chef said.

Makoto's hands dropped from his face and he watched as the chef walked over to a desk in the small room. He opened one of the big drawers and pulled out a water bottle.

Water bottle? In his desk drawer? Does he just keep those laying around?

"Eh? Are you sure, Haru-chan?" the blond asked.

Haru-chan?

The chef nodded mutely as he returned to Makoto's side, sitting down on the empty spot on the couch.

The two others exchanged looks before nodding to the chef.

"Let us know if you need anything, Haruka-san," the one with glasses said.

Haruka-san?

The chef nodded, and Makoto watched the other two leave. The chef turned his gaze back to Makoto, his eyes showing more concern than before.

"Are you sure you're okay?" the chef asked gently as he handed him the water bottle.

Makoto grimaced as he took the water, his face twisting into an apologetic frown.

"I… I'm fine," Makoto decided, slowly taking sips of the water.

The chef's brows lowered, almost looking irritated. "You almost passed out."

Makoto winced, but then tried for a small, shaky smile. He reached up to rub the back of his head, his fingers sliding along the scar that was buried beneath his brown hair.

"It's no big deal. Really," Makoto tried to convince.

Makoto hung his head and let his hand drop to his lap, palm up. His eyes flashed and for a moment, he thought he saw blood trickling in the center of his palm. His breath hitched softly and he blinked, the image quickly fading from his sight.

"It's… happened before," Makoto said softly, his voice slightly shaking.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Makoto instantly wished he could pull them back in. The look on the chef's face was of pure shock, with his eyes widened and lips parted. Makoto immediately tried to backtrack, lifting up his hands.

"But it really is no big deal," Makoto was quick to say, waving his hands in the air. "I'm fine now."

The chef paused, looking at him with a peculiar expression. It was practically unreadable and Makoto felt his mouth go dry. Just how quiet was this guy going to be?

"A-Anyway… I'm already pretty late for work," Makoto stuttered. "I should really get goi—"

"What happened to your old job?" the chef asked suddenly.

Makoto snapped his gaze to the chef's, blinking rapidly. His body went stiff as he froze on the couch, the cool leather suddenly hot underneath his fingertips. He gulped, feeling the piercing gaze of those cool, blue eyes.

"W-Well, uh…" Makoto stuttered, a tight smile forming on his face. "I was… let go."

The chef's eyes narrowed and Makoto mentally slapped himself.

Great. Not only does he think you're insane but he probably thinks you're a loser, too. Just… great.

"And now you're doing construction." The chef spoke up again, easily dragging Makoto from his belittling thoughts.

He glanced up at the chef. He opened his mouth, ready to say that yes, he was in construction now, but different words tumbled out of his mouth instead.

"I'm, uh… I'm actually looking for a new job," Makoto admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

The chef paused. "A new job?"

Makoto bit his lip. Why in the world had he decided to relay that information? It was too personal. All of it was way too difficult to explain. He should not be pouring out his life to this man! He probably had his own issues to deal with.

"Yeah, uh… I just need something that's… safer, and with better pay," Makoto decided to say. He tugged on his fingers in his lap and chewed on his lip. "I, uh… I need it for my siblings."

The chef paused longer this time and Makoto felt his spine crack from how straight he had been sitting.

Too much information. Too much information!

Makoto capped his water bottle and quickly stood up from the couch, ignoring the dizziness that made the room sway momentarily. To try to hide it, he offered a polite, yet sheepish, smile.

"W-Well, thank you, again, for helping me out," Makoto stammered. He gave a quick bow to the chef and then turned to leave, his hand grabbing the doorknob to the small office. "Sorry for taking up your time and disturbing you. I should really leave before I bother—"

"You could work here."

Makoto froze, his hand loosening its grip on the doorknob. He turned around to peer at the chef with wide eyes.

"W-What?" Makoto stuttered.

The chef looked away briefly before turning back to look at Makoto, his gaze no less serious.

"There's an opening for a stockroom manager," the chef explained.

Makoto's hand dropped from the doorknob, his heart thudding against his chest. His thoughts flashed back to when he and the twins had walked by every morning: the neat sign in the window that read *Now Hiring*.

Was this the job that they interviewing people for?

"Stockroom manager?" Makoto echoed.

The chef nodded. "We get shipments of fresh ingredients every few days and they're supposed to be organized in either the freezer or the stockroom. But our last manager quit and all of our supplies have been difficult to find."

Makoto took in what the chef had to say, his jaw dropping as more and more words flowed from his mouth in a smooth elegance. He was incredible, to say the least.

"The job could be yours if you're up for it," the chef concluded.

Makoto jolted back to life, staring down at the chef in front of him with wide, green eyes. The words slowly sunk in, the warmth spreading up his chest and back. His headache had been long forgotten, the dizziness now from overwhelming hope.

"R-Really?" Makoto asked.

The chef nodded, still looking up at him with determined eyes.

Makoto swallowed down the sob that wanted to climb up his throat and he finally let himself *smile*. After almost two weeks of harsh conditions at both work and home, he was finally starting to see and feel relief.

But what if he was not qualified?

Makoto shook his head, flinging the thought away. He was tired of the doubts that had crept up on him and lingered on his shoulders for the past months. It was time for a change.

It was time to take another step to help Ran and Ren.

"Wow…" Makoto whispered. "That would… that would be great! Um… who do I need to talk to about the hiring process?"

"Me," the chef answered bluntly.

Makoto's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh, are you in charge of hiring, too?"

The chef nodded. "I'm the owner. Nanase Haruka."

Makoto froze, the smile on his face twitching.

Owner?

Makoto pictured himself running down the street and plowing into someone, forcefully pushing both of them down to the ground and breaking the colorful chalkboard display sign.

He choked on his spit.

Crap! I completely knocked him over a few weeks ago and *broke his sign! And you're telling me that this whole time, he had been the owner?!*

Makoto immediately bent at the waist, deeply bowing to the chef, er, owner, er… Nanase.

"I-I-I am *so* sorry for my behavior in the recent weeks!" Makoto apologized. "It wasn't my intention to knock you down or to break your sign! I will take full responsibility for it!"

He heard Nanase sigh, and he lifted up his head to see him shaking his head lightly.

"The sign again…" he mumbled. "I already told you not to worry about it," Nanase said more firmly.

Makoto stood up straight and fiddled with his jacket, feeling all too underdressed for even stepping

foot inside his restaurant.

Nanase stood to his feet and straightened out his chef's uniform, looking at Makoto. He reached out his hand to Makoto.

"So are you up for it, Mister…?"

Makoto hesitated and then took Nanase's hand, shaking it gently.

"Tachibana," Makoto said. "Tachibana Makoto."

Nanase's eyes flashed for a moment, widening. Makoto could hear him inhale sharply before clearing his throat.

"I… I see," Nanase said. He released Makoto's hand and stared back at him, his eyes back to normal. "Well, if you could come in for training on Saturday, then you could start Monday."

Makoto's chest swelled. He nodded vigorously and bowed one last time.

"I will. Thank you *so* much!"

"Eh? Another new job, Onii-chan?"

Makoto sat down at the dinner table that night with a big, content sigh. He nodded as he passed out napkins and bowls for the ramen sitting in the middle of the table.

"Yep!" Makoto said, happy that the dense pain in his chest was replaced by something lighter. He smiled teasingly at his siblings as he poured the ramen for them. "And you'll never guess where."

"A firefighter?" Ren asked, cocking his head to the side.

"Ren, Onii-chan couldn't get a job as a firefighter!" Ran protested.

"Eh? Why not?" Ren asked.

"Because it's not safe, remember?" Ran said. "Onii-chan said that he was required to get a *safe* job. Not one that has him going into burning buildings and getting trapped under falling beams!"

Ren's face paled at her explanation and he recoiled from her with wide eyes. He nodded, agreeing with his sister.

"R-Right…" he said shakily.

Ran turned back to look at Makoto with a sparkle in her eye.

"I bet Onii-chan is some sort of teacher!" she said, jumping to his feet and slamming her palms flat on the table.

Makoto chuckled and shook his head. He handed her the filled bowl of ramen and smiled fondly at the idea. As much as he would love to see that happen…

"Nope," Makoto answered, pushing the depressing thoughts back down. He handed Ren his bowl of ramen and he gazed at Makoto with concerned eyes.

"Then what is it, Onii-chan?" Ren asked.

Makoto set down his bowl of ramen and exchanged looks with the both of them. He smiled to himself, unable to hold back his excitement.

"Well, there's a certain restaurant that you two have been begging to go to lately…"

"What?!"

"Eh?!"

Makoto winced at both of their shrieks of excitement, his head still lightly throbbing against his fragile skull. His eye twitched when he glanced at them again.

"I'm, um, organizing their ingredients in their freezers, refrigerators, and pantry," Makoto explained.

"No way!" Ran exclaimed. "Does that mean we get to go there?"

"Oh, yeah, can we, Onii-chan?" Ren asked, his eyes upturned in a pitiful beg.

Makoto smiled and tilted his head.

"I'll have to ask Nanase-san."

"Nanase-san?" Ren asked.

"Who is that?" Ran asked.

The two of them had completely abandoned their ramen by now and were totally engrossed in Makoto's story.

"Oh! Right. You remember that chef we met the other day?" he asked.

The twins nodded happily, both reminiscing about the wonderful food he had given them that day. Makoto could not agree more.

"Well, he's the owner of the restaurant and well…" Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a bit awkward. "I, uh… I ran into him today and he… offered me a job."

"The owner?! Seriously?"

"That's really cool, Onii-chan!"

Makoto smiled and nodded and then gestured towards the food. They all said a quick "Itadakimasu" before digging into their meals. The ramen luckily had not gotten cold by all of their talking.

"All right! Let's eat so you two can finish your homework," Makoto said.

"Ugh!"

"Really, Onii-chan?"

"Yes, really," Makoto said firmly. "Now hurry up and—"

Suddenly, Makoto felt his pocket vibrate. His chest tightened at the feeling. Phone calls were not usually a good sign these days.

He pulled the offending phone from his pocket and glanced down at the screen.

Incoming call:

Sousuke

Makoto winced. Of course, Sousuke was calling again. He had been ignoring his best friend for far too long. Guilt had settled in his stomach like a brick and he abruptly stood up from his seat.

"I'll be right back," Makoto told the twins as he walked out of the kitchen.

Once he was out of earshot from the twins, he took a slow, deep breath and hit the green button on the screen and then lifted the phone to his ear.

"H-Hello?"

"*'Bout time you picked up!"*

Sousuke's voice rang angrily over the phone, and Makoto flinched it away from his ear. His headache came back in full swing and he sighed, his shoulders drooping.

"I'm sorry," Makoto apologized.

"You're *sorry?!*" Sousuke said gruffly. "What kind of excuses do you have to ignore your phone, huh? We've been friends for *how long?!"*

Makoto felt his chest tighten in pain. "Things have been… strained lately."

"You mean like you getting fired from the Tokyo Marketing Firm?"

Makoto winced, his free hand by his side gripping his pants. Of *course*, Sousuke had found out. His dad *was* the one to get him that job, so Sousuke would have heard from him if anything had changed.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed sadly. "Tell Uncle I'm sorry."

He did not know what else to say. There was nothing else he *could* say. His secret had been let out and he felt cold and naked standing in the narrow hallway of the apartment.

Sousuke hesitated, and then he heaved a huge sigh. His tone softened from his angry state into something more sympathetic.

"Do you need help, Makoto?" Sousuke asked softly. "I can drive up there tomorrow and help you figure things out."

"Sousuke, you can't just leave your job," Makoto said.

"I can and I will, Makoto. After everything you've done for me, you know I owe you," Sousuke said.

Makoto managed to laugh lightly. "So, I'm just a favor, now? I thought that's what friends just did for each other," he said teasingly.

"You *know* what I mean," Sousuke said, his voice bordering on dangerous.

"I know, I know," Makoto said calmingly. "But, actually… everything's worked out for now."

Sousuke hummed suspiciously, and Makoto could almost picture him raising a brow.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I actually got a new job today. My first day is on Monday," Makoto explained.

"Eh? New job?" Sousuke said. "What's the new job?"

"Oh, I'm working as a stock manager for a five-star restaurant," Makoto said, almost proudly.

"Hm," Sousuke hummed, not sounding too pleased. "Who hired you?"

Makoto paused, wondering where Sousuke was going with this.

"Um, the owner's name is Nanase Haruka," Makoto responded.

"Nanase, huh?" Sousuke said, his voice lowering.

Sousuke paused for another moment, and Makoto worried that Sousuke was displeased with his new job. But he could not tell Sousuke that he had no other options. That conversation... would not end well.

"Well, fine. But if it's not working out, will you *please* tell me? I don't want you to think you're alone in this, Makoto. You've always hidden your feelings and put others first. You need to think about yourself."

Makoto was touched, his heart wrenching inside his chest. Another brick of guilt layered inside his stomach and he sighed, regretting ever ignoring Sousuke's calls.

"I'm sorry, Sousuke," Makoto apologized again.

Sousuke huffed. "Stop with the apologies. Just… call me more. Okay?"

Makoto hummed and nodded. "I will. It's a promise."

"Tell the runts I said hello."

"Will do. Bye, Sousuke."

"Bye."

Makoto hung up the phone, feeling both lighter and heavier at the same time. The bricks in his stomach were slowly crumbling as Sousuke's calming words washed over him like a wave.

It felt good to talk to Sousuke again, even if it was just a few minutes. He had missed the days where he could talk to Sousuke every day, even when it was just at the hospital when Sousuke was going through physical therapy. The truth was… Makoto *missed* his best friend.

He sighed as he pocketed his phone and reentered the kitchen. He sat down at the table, watching as his siblings were helping themselves to more ramen.

"Who was that, Onii-chan?" Ren asked. "Was it Sousuke-nii-chan?"

"Eh?! Sousuke-nii-chan called and you didn't let me speak to him?!" Ran yelped.

Makoto smiled and picked up his chopsticks. "He was… busy. But he told me to tell you hello."

Ran and Ren exchanged pouts and then continued to go back to their food. It was mostly quiet, save for the slurping of the noodles. Ran and Ren talked about the restaurant more, both excited about the possibilities of eating more delicious food.

Makoto could behind that possibility.

"Hey, Onii-chan," Ran said with her mouth full of noodles.

"Hm?" Makoto hummed as he scooped more noodles into his bowl.

"Nanase-san just hired you right away, right?" she asked.

Makoto nodded and then picked up some of the noodles from his bowl in between his chopsticks.

"Wow. You must be pretty good friends with Nanase-san for him to offer you a job just like that," Ran pointed out.

Makoto's chopsticks froze halfway up to his mouth and he turned and looked at Ran curiously. He lowered his hand back down to the table and stared at his food, his chest fluttering strangely.

"Haru-chan!"

"Haruka-san."

"I'm the owner. Nanase Haruka."

Makoto's brows pinched together as a painful pang throbbed against his skull. He reached up to massage the back of his head, right over that scar.

"His name did seem… familiar," Makoto mumbled.

"What was that, Onii-chan?" Ren asked.

Makoto snapped out of his daze and shook his head, digging his chopsticks back into his bowl.

"Nothing, nothing! Don't want to let these noodles get cold, right?"

"Oh, what a coincidence! Someone who has a girly name like me!"

"Thank you for helping me, Haru-chan!"

"Oh, right! Sorry, Haru-chan. My name is Makoto! Tachibana Makoto!"

"Ah, Haru-chan, be careful with—UWAH! HARU!"

"H-H-Haru? Are you okay?! Speak to me, Haru! Please!"

"Please don't leave me alone!"

"H-Haru-chaan…"

"HARU!"

Haru woke up with a gasp, shooting up in his bed and clutching his chest. He swallowed as the

memories faded back into his subconscious. A few beads of sweat slipped down his head and to his neck and he sluggishly lifted a hand to wipe them off.

It was him.

It was not just a coincidence or an eerie lookalike.

He was definitely the boy he had played with so often as a child.

Haru breathed in deep pants, his lungs filling with burning air. He reached up to wipe his forehead and sighed, feeling exhausted and confused.

But if that truly is *him,* Haru thought. *Then why doesn't he say anything? Does he not have any recollection of what happened? Especially that day…*

The scarf flowing in the breeze.

The bridge overlooking the river.

The cold, *cold* water.

The screams of terror that came from his friend.

Haru shivered.

There was no doubt in his mind.

Tachibana Makoto, with tears streaming from his green eyes, was the boy who saved him from the water so many years ago.

Chapter End Notes

I listened to a lot of rain sounds while writing this...

My concentration is shot.

Come find me on Tumblr!

You're doing your best

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! Another long chapter for you :)
Thaaaank you Tayu-Chan for help with this!!!

By the way, I may or may not have the flu, so the next update might be a little iffy. I'll try my best to post the next chapter on time!

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And you're sure you didn't lose consciousness?"

"I'm pretty sure I didn't, I was just… really disoriented."

"Is there any swelling around the surgery site?"

"Um…"

Makoto reached up to touch the back of his head as if to see if his skull was still intact. It was firm under his fingers. A little disfigured and lumpy in some places, but still solid. He shivered when his fingertips brushed the jagged lines leftover from the staples.

"No, not really," Makoto answered to his doctor on the phone.

"Hmm…"

His doctor seemed skeptical, making Makoto grind his teeth. He had always been reluctant to call him even though he was required to call him to give an update on his head at least twice a month.

"You really should come in so I can examine you," his doctor said. "I know you said you were fine after a few minutes but you still blacked out."

Makoto's thumb rubbed over his forefinger nervously. He did not want to go back to the hospital.

"Yes, but I'm really feeling fine," Makoto assured.

"Are you still having headaches?"

A strangled noise escaped his throat and he leaned back to look up at the ceiling. His leg bounced on the hard floor and his teeth gnawed on his lip.

"Well… sometimes," Makoto admitted sheepishly.

"Have you been to any kind of doctor about them?" his doctor asked.

Makoto gulped and closed his eyes.

"Not… no," Makoto finally answered.

"Tachibana-san," his doctor said with a sigh. "Your skull was badly fractured only months ago. You need to be seeing a doctor regularly for this."

Makoto sputtered, waving his free hand in the air as if his doctor could see him.

"I-I know! But, you see, I've been really busy and—"

"Being *really busy* is not an excuse to neglect your health."

Makoto winced at his doctor's harsh tone and he lowered his free hand to rest in his lap. He released a defeated sigh and hunched over his knees.

"Yes, I know," Makoto said. "I'll try to schedule an appointment soon."

"Please do."

And with those parting words, Makoto hung up and then slumped back against the couch. His head rolled back with a soft *fwump* against the cushions and he stared up at the ceiling.

For the past few months, all Makoto had concerned himself with was making sure he had enough money for rent and to pay off the medical bills still leftover from the accident. That did not even include food for the twins.

I'll just have to schedule an appointment later, Makoto thought as he shoved his phone into his pocket.

He stood up from the couch and looked himself over, his hands smoothing out his white button-up shirt. He sighed, hoping that the wrinkles were unnoticeable. He had never really learned to properly iron his shirts when he had lived at home.

Home…

"Makoto, do you need help, honey?"

"Ah, no, I think I'm all ready for the interview, Mom!"

"Well, you *might be ready, but your* appearance *sure isn't."*

"Eh?"

"You can't go to the university interview with a wrinkled shirt! Take it off."

"Mooom."

"No whining. Take it off and I'll iron it for you."

"Hng. Mom, you really don't have to go through all this for me."

"Hehe. I know, dear. I'll have to teach you how to properly iron your shirts! I won't always be around to help you with this."

"Mmn, I guess so. Hey, I'm going to make sure I have everything I need."

"All right, dear. This will only take a minute!"

Makoto's brows scrunched as they lowered over his green eyes.

Did he…?

"Okay! I'll be right back, Mom!"

Makoto sighed and clicked his tongue at himself.

His shirt had even looked extra crisp that day, making him go into his university interview with strong confidence. Makoto had also aced his entrance exams that day, able to come home and tell his family and Sousuke that he felt so relieved that the process was over.

But he forgot one important thing.

He had failed to thank his mother that day.

Makoto's stomach clenched and he shuddered, guilt clawing him from all sides and making every joint ache.

With just a slight turn of his head, Makoto could see the smooth edge of one of the wooden shrines tucked back in the corner. He could barely make out his mother's shining face in the picture.

Makoto blinked when his eyes burned slightly and he reached up with both hands to slap the sides of his face.

All right! He thought. *No time to be sad! I've got training to get through today!*

Makoto released a quick puff of air and then walked into the kitchen to see his brother and sister sitting at the table. There were piles of textbooks and notebooks sitting next to them. Ran had what looked like a math textbook in front of her while a blank sketchpad sat in front of Ren.

"Ah, homework on a Saturday?" Makoto asked with a small smile.

Ren shrunk a little in his seat with his nose almost touching the white pad while Ran glanced up with a pout on her face, her cheeks puffed out in mild irritation.

"It's so boring, Onii-chan," Ran said, resting her pencil down into the crack of her textbook. She sat up straighter and looked at Makoto with sparkles in her eyes. "Can't we do something fun when you get back?"

Makoto's smile widened and he tilted his head to the side.

"Well, if you guys think of something fun to do, then we'll try to do it when I get back," Makoto said.

"Really?!" Ran asked, her smile now widened. "Can we go to the park?!"

Makoto thought about it for a moment and then nodded, a little happier now that his sister seemed to perk up. She pumped her fists and then hunched over her textbook, going into hyperdrive on her homework.

Makoto shook his head fondly and then glanced down at his brother, who was clutching his pencil so hard that he thought it would snap.

"What are you working on there, Ren?" Makoto asked.

Ren bit his lip and glanced up at Makoto with timid eyes.

"It's for art club," Ren said quietly. He glanced back down at his blank sketchpad. "It's an assignment that I have to redo."

Makoto tiled his head and eyed his brother's forlorn expression. He was terrible at art when he was in school and knew he could not possibly help Ren, but he was willing to try.

"What's the assignment?" Makoto asked, leaning forward to look at the white paper.

Ren's lips twisted and his brows knitted together. "Everyone was given a word and we have to sketch something that describes it."

Makoto scratched his cheek. It did not *seem* difficult but he knew how art teachers worked.

"You said you had to redo it?" Makoto asked.

Ren pouted and nodded. He let his head hang forward.

"Sensei said it I have to think deeper. My sketch was too literal and typical, according to her," Ren explained.

Makoto released a soft sigh.

Isn't that subjective?!

He was reminded of all of the failed prompts he had received in art classes growing up. It did not help that Sousuke was terrible at it, too. Makoto pinched the bridge of his nose to try to soften his face.

"Can I see what you drew?" Makoto asked, looking down at his brother tenderly.

Ren shifted in his seat and then carefully grasped his sketchpad. He flipped over a few pages until it landed on a colorful picture.

It was a sketch of his and Ran's shared bedroom, with a girl even lying on her bed with a book. It was beautifully drawn, and Makoto was impressed by his brother's skills. He had no idea that his brother could draw so well.

"Oh, is that Ran?" Makoto asked, pointing to the picture of the girl lying on the bed.

Ran perked up from her homework and jumped up, leaning over the table to see the sketch.

"Me?! Lemme see, lemme see!" she shouted, stretching her neck to peer down at Ren's drawing.

Ren blushed and sunk into his seat. He averted his eyes from his siblings and reached up to scratch his cheek.

"Y-Yeah, but just your hair," Ren said, talking to Ran. "I… I'm not good at drawing faces."

Makoto studied the drawing more, noticing that Ren had just drawn the back of Ran's head and none of her face. But her arms and legs were detailed. He could even count the fingers on Ran's right hand.

If Ren had sketched out something like this so strikingly accurate, why was his teacher making him redo it?

"What was your word?" Makoto asked, turning to look down at his brother with a quirked brow.

Ren squirmed in his seat, his fingers tightening slightly on the sketchpad, creating tiny wrinkles in the paper. He slowly turned his head up to look at Makoto, a squeamish look on his face.

"H-Home," Ren answered softly.

Makoto's brows lowered in confusion as he turned back to look at Ren's drawing. It was a literal picture of his home. Why did that not count?

As if sensing Makoto's question, Ren spoke up again.

"Sensei said that I needed to draw what home means to me," Ren started. He bit his lip before continuing. "Like… what makes me feel at home, I guess? She said it couldn't be a literal drawing of our home."

Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, at a total loss. He gave Ren a sympathetic smile.

"I'm sure you'll come up with something, Ren," Makoto said as he patted Ren's head. Ren nodded underneath his brother's palm and turned back to a blank page to stare at it once more.

Makoto breathed a sigh and then glanced down at his watch. His training would start soon.

"All right. I have to leave now," Makoto said, turning to look up at Ran and Ren. "Don't leave the apartment or answer the door, okay? There's food in the fridge for lunch, just heat it up. And call me if there are any emergencies."

"Yes, yes, Onii-chan," Ran said. She flipped her hand up into the air without taking her eyes from her textbook. "We got it."

Makoto winced slightly. While he knew that several children the twins' age were left home alone all across Japan on a daily basis, it did not mean that their situation was normal. If Sato were to hear about this, he would not know what the consequences would be.

"All right. I'll be back in a few hours," Makoto said, lifting up a hand to wave them off from the front door.

"Bye, Onii-chan!"

With the sounds of his siblings' goodbyes ringing in his ears, Makoto left the apartment with a slight tinge of apprehension flowing through his veins. He shook his head to try and stifle his fears, instead choosing to focus on the task at hand: his training.

Nanase was so kind to him, offering him a job like that out of the blue. He was unsure how he could ever repay him.

"You don't have to keep bowing to me, you know."

Makoto jolted and straightened his back. His face flushed all the way to the tips of his ears.

"S-Sorry," Makoto apologized.

Nanase blinked at him and then walked over to his desk. He opened up one of the drawers and pulled out a folder.

"This is the contract for the position," Nanase said, handing Makoto the black folder.

Makoto took the folder gingerly and opened it up. Inside were neatly arranged papers held

together by a paperclip. Makoto gently thumbed through the contract, noticing its policies and expectations along with an outline of his job description.

With another page flip and there was a brief overview of his salary. Makoto's brows rose a little, eyeing the exact amount of yen he would be receiving. He smiled, thankful, but could not stop the weird sinking feeling in his gut.

While it was enough to pay for rent, food, and maybe some of the funeral costs and hospital bills…

It was not enough to pay for a bigger apartment.

"What's wrong?"

Makoto looked up from the contract to peer at concerned blue eyes. Nanase's face was a little tense, his forehead slightly creased. His hands were even curled into fists by his sides.

Who knew he could make such an expression?

"Is something wrong with the contract?" Nanase asked, nodding towards the folder in his hands.

Makoto finally snapped out of his gaze and immediately lifted up a hand to wave in the air. He almost dropped the folder in the process.

"O-Oh! Nothing's wrong!" Makoto said. He tried to give his best smile. "Everything is great."

Makoto smiled to himself, knowing that Sato would be pleased with the job change. But his smile faded as quickly as it formed and he could not suppress a sigh.

He would have to save every single yen he possibly could to go towards a new apartment.

With another sigh, Makoto shook the thoughts away and hurried to the restaurant.

Focus, he told himself.

After walking another block and then gingerly crossing the street, he had finally reached the Nanase Rest House. He took a deep, determined breath and then pressed forward to the doors, opening one and then carefully stepping inside.

The inside of the restaurant was just as gorgeous as he remembered from the other day.

There were several elegant chandeliers hanging overhead in the tall ceilings, all ornamented with little shimmering crystals. Over the windows hung dark blue curtains that were long enough to reach the floor. Even the tables were neatly prepared with pressed tablecloths and artfully decorated centerpieces.

Makoto's lip twisted along with his gut.

I might be out of my element here…

"Oh! You're here early!"

Makoto jumped at the sudden chirp next to him and he whirled around to see the same short blond that he had briefly seen the other day. His eyes were wide and his smile was cheerful.

"You're Mako-chan, right?" he asked, standing a little on his tiptoes to lean up closer to Makoto.

Makoto automatically leaned back a bit and he tilted his head at the nickname.

"Um…" *Mako-chan?* "I'm… I'm Tachibana Makoto, yes," Makoto answered.

"Great!" the boy chirped. He placed his hands on his hips. "I'm Hazuki Nagisa, but you can just call me Nagisa! I'm one of the waiters here!"

Makoto's face easily broke into a smile, brightened up by this cheerful boy in front of him.

"Nice to meet you, Nagisa," Makoto greeted with a slight bow of his head.

"Haru-chan asked me to wait for you so I can show you around the restaurant!" Nagisa said.

"O-Oh, really? Nanase isn't here, yet?" Makoto asked, a little nervously.

"Mmn! He's having a meeting with the other chefs," Nagisa explained.

Makoto's eyes widened. He had nearly forgotten that Nanase was a chef, as well.

"Wow," Makoto breathed. "How does he do it all? Being the owner and a chef…"

"Oh! He's not just any chef! Haru-chan is the *head*-chef!" Nagisa beamed.

"Eh?!" Makoto squeaked, completely amazed. "H-Head chef, too? Wow… Nanase is amazing."

Nagisa nodded happily, his hands held together behind his back.

"He's always been this good at everything," Nagisa said cheekily. "Now, now, I'm supposed to show you around!" he said, grabbing Makoto by the arm and tugging him forward.

"O-Oh, uh, is… is that okay? I mean, I don't want to disturb what you're doing," Makoto said.

"Nonsense! Haru-chan asked me and Rei-chan to help you!"

Rei-*chan*? Did this guy have a nickname for everyone?

"If by help, I assume you mean give him the rules and regulations."

Makoto let out an embarrassing high-pitched shriek and whirled around to face a taller man with red-framed glasses.

Nagisa chuckled lightly and patted Makoto on the back to calm him down.

"This is Rei-chan!" Nagisa said. "He's in charge of the hosting station!"

Rei-chan bowed his head politely to Makoto in greeting.

"Ryugazaki Rei," he introduced coolly.

Makoto's smile wobbled a little but he bowed his head politely anyway.

"N-Nice to meet you," Makoto said. "I'm Tachibana Makoto."

"Nice to meet you, Tachibana-san," Rei greeted. "So are you here part-time, as well?"

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm here full-time," Makoto answered.

Rei's eyes widened a bit. "Oh, really? I hope I'm not being presumptuous, but you look to be close to our age."

"Yeah! How old are you, Mako-chan?" Nagisa asked.

"I'm 22," Makoto answered with a small smile on his face.

"Oh, same as Haru-chan! So you're a year older than us!" Nagisa exclaimed with wide eyes.

"Eh? Nanase-san is the same age as me?" Makoto asked, surprised.

"Indeed," Rei answered. "Haruka-san is quite accomplished for his age."

Makoto blinked at the two of them. The new information flooding his brain went into overload and he was having trouble keeping up.

Just how amazing was this guy?!

"Do you go to a university around here, then?"

Makoto jolted at Nagisa's question and he bit his lip. He reached up to rub the back of his neck while he averted his gaze from the two standing in front of him.

"W-Well, I, uh…" Makoto stuttered. "I… was in a university here in Tokyo last year, but… I dropped out."

Nagisa and Rei's brows rose in surprise.

"Oh, I see," Rei said softly.

"What made you want to drop out?" Nagisa asked, cocking his head.

Makoto winced and his eyes moved to look at the ground. He shifted his weight between his feet and fidgeted, unsure of how to answer.

"Well…" Makoto started. He was hesitant to answer, unsure if it would be giving too much personal information. "I, uh…"

"Oi."

The three of them turned to see the familiar chef walking towards them. He was donned in his usual chef's uniform with a soft scowl on his face.

"Didn't I tell you guys to show him around?" Nanase asked when he stopped in front of them.

Nagisa smiled sheepishly and Rei averted his eyes.

"Well, we did show him around a little bit," Nagisa said.

"You only took him to the hosting booth," Rei said with a quirked brow.

Nagisa pouted at him, puffing out his cheeks a little.

"Rei-chan, you could've helped me, too."

"What?! Don't drag me into this!"

Nanase sighed and shook his head, his face looking regretful for some reason.

"Just go get ready for opening," Nanase said. "I'll send him to you guys later."

The two of them stopped their bickering, and Nagisa gave Nanase a salute while Rei bowed politely.

Once they were gone, Makoto turned back to meet a pair of blue eyes.

"Ah, good morning, Nanase-san," Makoto greeted with a slight bow of his head.

Nanase regarded him for a moment, his expression deadpan save for the slight twitch in his right brow. He stomped over to Makoto's side and grabbed the collar of his shirt, his brows now pressed closer together.

"Your shirt is wrinkled," Nanase said.

Makoto shrunk under his gaze, remaining frozen in place as Nanase's hand still gripped his collar.

"U-Um…" Makoto stuttered, feeling his face drain of all color. "I'm… I'm sorry."

Nanase studied him for a few more moments and then let go of his collar with a soft sigh.

"Come with me," Nanase said, gesturing towards a door in the back of the restaurant.

Makoto gulped and started to follow Nanase to the obscure door in the back. He fidgeted with his shirt, trying to subtly smooth out the wrinkles as best as he possibly could. Sweat started to bead on his forehead as fear settled into his stomach as they entered through the door.

Nanase would not fire him today, would he?!

Would he… be back at the start?

"I do hope you are aware of the consequences if these standards aren't met. Right, Tachibana-san?"

Makoto winced at Sato's words. If he could not keep this job, then Ran and Ren… they would be…

And he needed this job... he *needed* to do well so he could...

"Oh, now, now. It's all right, Makoto! They're just babies. They're going to cry."

"Yeah, Makoto! It's okay, son. I'm sure they don't hate you."

"That's true. You've been taking such good care of them."

"We're so proud of you, Makoto. You've done a good job!"

"We love you very mu—"

"Take off your shirt."

Makoto snapped his head up, the memories fading as echoes into the back of his mind. He glanced up to see the chef staring at him with his sleeves rolled up and a deadpan look on his face.

"W-What?" Makoto squeaked.

Nanase's brow quirked.

"Your shirt. Take it off so I can iron it," Nanase said.

Makoto suddenly noticed the iron in his hand as well as an iron board set up in the corner. With trembling fingers, Makoto reached up and unbuttoned his white shirt.

How humiliating, Makoto thought.

Once he was just left in his white t-shirt, he passed off the button-up shirt to Nanase. Nanase took the shirt and inspected it, eyeing all of the wrinkles with an irked look on his face. He cut his eyes at Makoto, giving him a harsh look. Makoto sputtered and then bowed to him.

"I'm really sorry!" Makoto apologized quickly.

Nanase hesitated for a moment but then placed the shirt face-down on the ironing board.

"Don't worry about it," Nanase said. Makoto peeked up at Nanase, staring at his gentle eyes. "And stop bowing all the time."

Makoto quickly straightened his back and watched as Nanase got to work on his shirt. He moved the iron with ease, the wrinkles rapidly disappearing before his very eyes. It was such a small task yet it made his shirt look so much sharper.

"How did you get it wrinkled here?" Nanase asked, pointing to the sleeve.

Makoto chuckled nervously to try to cover up his embarrassment. He rubbed the back of his neck again, wincing slightly when he felt how raw the skin had become.

"I really couldn't tell you," Makoto admitted sheepishly.

Nanase's brow twitched at his words and he straightened out the sleeve with a sigh. He carefully ran an iron over the sleeve, the wrinkles smoothing out with each passing.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you how to iron your clothes?" Nanase asked.

Makoto froze.

He felt his smile tumble from his face and his blood felt like ice in his veins.

The air in his lungs stilled.

His parents…

"You can't go to the university interview with a wrinkled shirt! Take it off."

Makoto's hands shook lightly by his sides and his gaze lowered to the floor. His lips quivered into a small smile and he used one finger to scratch at his cheek.

"They, uh… don't have time for me anymore," Makoto said softly.

Well… it isn't a lie… he thought.

Makoto forced out a chuckle and then lifted his gaze back up to Nanase to offer a smile, but it froze on his face when he saw the strange look on Nanase's face. The look passed quickly as Nanase lowered his gaze back to the ironing board to finish ironing the sleeve of Makoto's white shirt.

"There," Nanase said, lifting up the now wrinkle-free shirt. He handed it to Makoto, and Makoto took the white fabric with gentle hands, afraid that even one move would cause a crease.

"O-Oh, thank you, Nanase-san," Makoto said with a slight crack in his voice. He nearly clicked his tongue.

Why am I so frazzled?! It's not like Nanase knows about my parents! Just… calm down, Makoto. Calm down.

Makoto took slow breaths as he pushed his arms through the sleeves of his shirt and then worked on the buttons. He glanced up at Nanase, who was staring at him with lowered brows.

"Let me show you the pantries," Nanase said. His face changed back to his normal, unreadable stare as he gestured towards the door. "Follow me."

Makoto glanced down at his shirt, his fingers lightly smoothing over the soft fabric. It was warm against his skin, but… he felt strangely cold.

In a strange daze, Makoto followed Nanase around the back of the restaurant for the rest of his training. He remembered being amazed at the size of the freezers and refrigerators as well as the heavy-duty equipment used for cleaning, but he could not shake the guilt that was pooling into his stomach.

"Here's the main pantry. It contains all of the dry foods and spices. But as you can see, it's…"

Makoto's eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

The pantry was in complete disarray, with spices randomly placed on different shelves. The bags of rice were on the floor, leaving no room to even stand. There were also boxes of some unknown food on the second shelf, and Makoto squinted to see that it had expired a week ago.

How did they find anything in here?

"I tried to keep it organized, but…"

Makoto glanced up to see Nanase rubbing the back of his black hair with averted eyes. He looked suddenly shy and even somewhat embarrassed.

"…I don't have time to go through everything. With trying to take care of cooking and running the restaurant, I'm busy enough as it is," Nanase continued. "And our deliveries on our supplies have been off recently. My guess is that since no one knows exactly what we have in stock, we just order what we think we need. We always end up with too much of one thing and not enough of something else."

Makoto glanced back down at the mess in the pantry, seeing that some of the food was still in delivery boxes in the corner. Nanase must have seen him eyeing it because he lifted a finger to point at them.

"When the delivery truck comes, I'm usually the only one unloading it. And since I have to prep my chefs for the day, some of the food doesn't get unpackaged or stowed properly," Nanase said. "We had someone else doing it before but they were just volunteering. They ended up quitting because it was too much."

Makoto glanced over at Nanase with curious eyes.

"Delivery truck?" Makoto repeated.

Nanase nodded. "A truck comes by on Mondays with the dry ingredients. On Wednesdays, the produce truck comes. And then on Fridays, we have the meat delivered."

"Wow," Makoto said, truly amazed.

He knew that running the restaurant was probably difficult, but he had no idea there were so many different aspects of it. He never thought about how a restaurant received its food. He just simply ordered what he wanted and then ate it.

Suddenly, Makoto was reminded of the times when his own pantry would magically refill itself as a teenager. He would go into the kitchen for a snack after school and would find that his favorite snacks were sitting on the shelves.

He remembered smiling about it and thinking, *Oh! Mom must've gone to the grocery store today.*

Then, Makoto would have grabbed what he wanted and then passed his mom in the living room without saying a word.

There was no, *Thank you for grabbing my favorite, Mom!*

Those words would have been so easy to say.

So… why did he not say them?

"You think you can handle getting this pantry into shape?" Nanase asked, pulling Makoto from his thoughts.

Makoto jumped and then glanced at Nanase, suddenly remembering that he was not in the kitchen from his teenaged years. After a beat of silence, Makoto peered back into the pantry, a determined look in his eye.

He gave a full head-nod and hummed. "I will do my best."

When Nanase paused for a long moment, Makoto's face reddened, realizing his embarrassing statement. He was about to backtrack when Nanase hummed and folded his arms across his chest.

"If you could somehow get a system going to get all of this organized, as well as the stuff in the freezers and refrigerators, then that would really help," Nanase said. He paused again, seeming deep in thought. "My dad was always good with stuff like that, especially when I first started out."

Makoto's brows lifted as he heard him speak. Something in his chest pinched but he tried to keep his face neutral.

"Y-Your dad?" Makoto asked, internally cursing his voice for cracking so much.

Nanase did not seem to notice, though, and he nodded in response. He turned to look out of the pantry and into the kitchen where the chefs were bustling about.

"This restaurant is actually my second restaurant," Nanase explained.

"Really?!" Makoto asked, his eyes wide.

Nanase nodded. "I started this one about a year ago," he explained.

Makoto's jaw dropped, never feeling so unaccomplished in his life.

"That's amazing!" he exclaimed.

Nanase pouted a little and looked away, a slight blush tinting the skin underneath his eyes.

"Thank you," Nanase mumbled. "Anyway… I finished my schooling and ended up graduating two years early. And back in my hometown, a businessman was interested in my dishes and he said he'd invest in me if I started up my own restaurant. I told my parents about it and they supported me from the beginning."

"Wow…" Makoto breathed, simply amazed by Nanase's story. How hard did he work to finish his schooling two years early?

"So in that restaurant in my hometown, my dad helped to organize all of my supplies, making it easy for all of the chefs to find what they needed. My dad was a big help," Nanase said softly.

Makoto's heart panged inside of his chest. Of course, Nanase's father would have been a big help. It was just what fathers did.

Fathers…

"What's wrong, Makoto?"

"Ah, I can't seem to get this tie to look right."

"Haha, oh come, now. Didn't I teach you how to properly tie a tie?"

"Y-Yes, but… you make it look easy."

"Well, I guess I have been doing it longer than you. Here, let me help you with that."

"Hng. I've been trying for the past twenty minutes and still can't get the knot to look right."

"How many years of high school did you have to wear a tie every day? And yet you still didn't properly learn how to tie it?"

"Daaad, I know how to tie it! I just don't know how to make the knot look like yours!"

"Well, you better watch and learn right now. You're moving out in two weeks, you've got to be able to do this on your own!"

"Sigh. Yes, Dad."

Makoto's stomach plummeted.

His father had been so patient with him that day, and he *still* had not learned how to properly tie a tie.

Seriously? Makoto thought. *Did I… really not even thank him for that?*

There was a heavy weight that sat on Makoto's shoulders, making him feel glued to the floor. There were so many things that Makoto had taken for granted when his parents were alive. Even just the daily interactions he had with them seemed so small at the time, but now, they meant *everything.*

What else had he taken for granted?

His siblings? Sousuke? His own life?

Had he known how fragile life truly was, he would have treated everything so differently.

If only he could go back.

If only he was given just five minutes to just talk to his parents again.

Or even just send one simple text.

He would tell them how much they mean to him.

He would tell them *everything.*

He would tell them *thank yo—*

"Are you okay?"

Makoto's breath hitched slightly and he blinked rapidly, coming back into view of the messy pantry room floor. He moved his head up and looked at Nanase, who was sporting a concerned look on his face.

Suddenly feeling guilty about making his own boss worry for him, Makoto put on a smile and tilted his head.

"O-Of course!" Makoto said.

He glanced around the pantry room and then turned to look out into the kitchen, seeing all the chefs busy working on prepping dishes for the day. He thought about how hard Nanase had worked, and how his parents had helped him to achieve his dream.

Makoto put on a sad smile.

"It's just… when I was in high school, my mom offered to iron my shirt for me once. When she was done, I just put on the shirt and headed out for my interview. I never thanked her for that," Makoto admitted. He rubbed the back of his neck. "With you ironing my shirt for me this morning, it reminded me of that. And I guess I was just feeling a little guilty for not thanking her back then."

Amongst other things… Makoto thought.

He was unsure of why he decided to tell Nanase any of this. It just blurted out of his mouth as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. Being close to Nanase also seemed to bring out several memories of his parents and Makoto could not place any reason as to why. Maybe he just felt a weird connection to him?

"It's not too late."

Makoto jumped at Nanase's voice and turned to look at him in the eye. Nanase was wearing an expression he could not decipher.

"You can always just thank her now," Nanase said. "She probably knows how thankful you are for it, anyway."

Makoto blanched, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. Every shallow breath hurt, and he could feel the prickle of tears starting to burn in his eyes. He glanced away, thinking over Nanase's words. He knew he would never be able to speak to his parents…

However…

She probably knows…

Maybe Nanase had a point.

Makoto smiled and then glanced up at Nanase with a hint of redness underneath his eyes.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed. "You're right."

"The truck arrives at 8 in the morning on Monday, so be here at least a half-hour earlier to unload it," Nanase said.

Makoto nodded with a smile and then bowed to Nanase, feeling eternally grateful for this job.

"I will be here," Makoto said. "Thank you so much for this."

Nanase huffed from above him. "I told you to stop bowing."

Makoto let out a soft chuckle and then leaned back up, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck.

"Right. Sorry," Makoto said, not sorry at all.

Nanase stared back at him with a deadpan expression, but Makoto could tell he was not really annoyed.

"Just be here on Monday," Nanase said.

Makoto nodded and then turned towards the door to leave, his hand touching the cool metal bar. He started to push it open when he heard Nanase's voice from behind.

"You can iron your shirt here if you need to," Nanase said. Makoto turned around to face him, seeing a tint of red on his cheeks. "Just use the one in the break room."

Makoto hesitated, taking in Nanase's words, and then smiled, feeling grateful for the offer.

"I will," Makoto said. He smiled even wider and tilted his head. "Thank you!"

With those parting words, Makoto left the restaurant right before they opened for the day. He headed back home towards his apartment feeling lighter than he had been all day.

He climbed up the stairs to their floor of the apartment complex and opened up the door to their apartment.

"I'm home!" Makoto announced upon entering.

"Welcome back!" came Ran's voice from the living room.

Makoto slipped his shoes off of his feet and then walked into the living room to see Ran and Ren sitting on the couch. Ran had a book in her hands and Ren still had his sketchpad on his lap, but now there were some pencil markings etched on the paper.

"How was training?" Ran asked.

"It was good, actually," Makoto said fondly, remembering how his mood had been drastically changed just by a few words from a man he hardly knew. "Did you finish your homework?" he

asked.

"Yes!" Ran shouted immediately, slapping her book shut. "Can we go to the park now?"

Makoto smiled and nodded. "As long as you guys are done, then that's fine."

"Yes!" Ran yelled, and jumped off the couch to rush to the bedroom. "I'm gonna go change!"

Makoto turned back to Ren, who was still lightly moving his pencil in swift movements over the white paper. He leaned over him to peer at his drawing.

"Did you come up with an idea, Ren?" Makoto asked his brother.

Ren stilled his hand and glanced up at his brother, his brown eyes a little timid.

"M-Maybe," Ren said.

"What're you drawing?" Makoto asked.

Ren bit his lip and then picked up a picture frame that had been hiding in his lap underneath the sketchpad. He handed to picture frame to Makoto, who took it with cautious hands.

When Makoto got a good look at the picture, his brows rose and his lips parted.

It was a picture of their family.

His mom and dad were standing in the back with Makoto standing in the middle. Ran and Ren stood in front of them with bright smiles on their faces. It was back when they were all full of life and had no worries.

His chest suddenly felt warm.

"You… you're drawing a picture of our family, Ren?" Makoto asked, handing him the picture frame.

Ren nodded, resting the picture frame on his lap and staring at the faint pencil marks on his sketchpad.

"When I think of home… I think of our family," Ren said. He looked up at Makoto with tears in his eyes. "All of us."

Makoto's heart broke at his brother's sincerity and he leaned down to pull Ren into a hug, patting his hair.

"I do, too, Ren," Makoto said softly.

"Hey, hey!"

Ran's voice echoed from down the hall and the two brothers separated to look at her head poking out of their bedroom.

"Ren, hurry up! Help me grab the baseball gloves!" she called.

Ren squeaked as he carefully set down his sketchpad on the coffee table and hurried down the hall.

"Don't take too long, okay?" Makoto called.

Once they had both disappeared into their bedroom, Makoto walked into the next room. He walked straight to his parents' shrines that were still tucked away in the corner and knelt down in front of them.

Makoto took a deep breath.

"Hi, Mom. Dad," he greeted. He paused, almost as if he were expecting an answer. When he did not hear one, he took in another deep breath. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Another pause and Makoto reached up to press the heel of his hand into his eye to stop the stinging.

"There's… so much I wish I could tell you—about the twins and about work… but there's something more pressing that I want to tell you," Makoto stuttered. He dropped his hand into his lap and hung his head slightly, a wobbling smile on his face.

"Mom… thank you for helping me with my shirt back then. I felt so confident in my college interview, and I'm pretty sure you were the reason for that."

He sniffed, still trying to keep his smile on his face.

"Dad… thank you for teaching me so many things, especially how to tie a tie. I should've paid better attention to you when you taught me, though."

He let out a wet chuckle, a hand coming up to cover his eyes. He sniffed again and took deep breaths to calm his trembling body. Once he had regained his composure, he dropped his hand and smiled again.

"I'm sorry for never telling you how much I needed you guys in my life. I'm sorry for never thanking you all those times. I hope you…" Makoto's breath hitched slightly but he managed to keep the tears at bay. "I hope you can forgive me for taking you for granted."

Makoto was silent, a sliver of hope bouncing in his stomach. He just wanted some kind of confirmation that he was forgiven so the weight of guilt could be lifted from his chest.

But the room remained silent, and Makoto's head hung in slight disappointment.

Well… it was like Nanase said, Makoto thought to try and cheer himself up. *They probably already know.*

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto wiped the stray tears from his eyes and then stood up from the floor. He padded out to the living room to see his siblings dressed and ready to play at the local park.

"We're ready!" Ran announced with her hand in the air.

Makoto smiled, feeling his heart soar.

"Yes, yes, get your shoes on," Makoto said, heading towards the front door.

Once they all had their shoes on, they moved to the front door, ready to leave. Makoto turned his head back to peer at the shrines in the corner.

Mom, Dad…

Makoto opened the front door and led his siblings out.

I hope I can earn your forgiveness one day.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, come find me/ask me questions on Tumblr!

You’re praying that you’ll make it

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is a day late! I've been sick and am just now starting to get over it.

Once again, thank you, Tayu-chan for helping me out with this chapter! Couldn't have done it without you :)

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No… nooo… Haru-chan… please wake up.”

“Shhh, Makoto. It’s okay. He’s going to be okay.”

“But, Mom… he’s not moving!”

“He’s going to be fine. He’s got pneumonia, that’s all. He’ll just be in here for a few days and then they’ll let him go home.”

“B-B-But…”

“Shh. Don’t cry, Makoto. It’s all right.”

Haru’s eyes twitched open and he squinted to see two blurry figures come into view. One was a small boy. His friend. Makoto.

Makoto’s head was lying face down on the hospital bed, sobs wracking his small body. He was trembling so bad that Haru felt the whole bed shake.

Makoto’s mother stood behind him, her hand gently running through his brown locks and whispering lightly.

“It’s okay, Makoto,” she whispered. “He will be okay.”

With his mother’s hand softly running through his hair, Makoto seemed to relax a little, his shoulders sagging and the trembling slowing. He hiccupped a few times and sniffled loudly.

“O-Okay,” Makoto whimpered pitifully.

Haru blinked at the sound, his heart skipping a beat. He took a slow breath through his nose and winced slightly at the pain in his chest. How did he get here? What happened?

Then, Haru remembered it.

The scarf.

The bridge.

The flowing river.

The cold, cold water.

Then… blackness…

But… there was a voice.

It was faint.

“Haru! HARU!”

Right.

He was… pulled from the river. And…

It was Makoto who had saved him.

Haru felt his eyelids grow heavy, his eyes trained on Makoto’s shaking form as he still cried on the bed.

‘Makoto,’ Haru thought as he closed his eyes to sleep.

‘You dummy.’

Haru’s eyes slowly opened and found himself, once again, greeted by the dark ceiling. He noticed that he was covered in a thin sheen of cold sweat and his body ached. His body eerily felt like it did when he was in that hospital: cold and fatigued from being tossed in that river.

Another dream, Haru thought as he flopped an arm over his eyes.

Ever since his first encounter with Tachibana a month ago, a majority of his dreams had reflected a memory from his childhood, each more vivid than the last. While he enjoyed reliving some of his memories, he hated waking up to thinking he was still in the hospital with pneumonia. It was a painful experience that he would not wish on anyone.

And the people who worried about him…

Haru sighed and rolled out of bed, the image of a crying Tachibana Makoto engrained in his brain. He walked to the living room and stepped up to the floor-length windows, gazing out into the city. The lights twinkled in the darkened sky and shimmered against Haru’s blue eyes. It was still too early to go into work but after that dream, Haru did not want to go back to sleep.

What do I even call him today at work? Should I call him ‘Makoto?’

Haru stared at his reflection in the window, noticing the unusual bags under his eyes.

His lips twisted.

“Ma…” Haru cleared his throat and tried to make his face more serious in the reflection. “Makoto.”

After a moment, Haru shook his head and sighed, his hand coming up to tug on his hair.

No, he thought. *Stick to being professional. He is an employee. I am his boss.*

Haru glanced back up to view at his reflection one last time, his mind drifting back to those sad images of his friend crying for him. He had looked so worried and distressed.

How could he not remember that event happening? He was crying so much, Haru thought.

He sighed and rubbed his face, blocking out the lights from the city below.

If anything, Haru thought. *I do not want to see him crying like that ever again.*

Makoto stared at himself in the mirror, his face hardened in a concentrated stare.

Okay. It's not wrinkled.

He turned around to peer at the back of his shirt, seeing a few creases near his pant line. He pouted sleepily at his shirt, feeling offended.

Well. Not as bad as it was on Saturday.

Makoto tried smoothing out the lines of his shirt, but when the creases remained, he ended up tucking the shirt in more to hide them. He sighed and hoped that Nanase would not notice.

"Onii-chan, are you ready?"

Makoto startled at the voice coming from the doorway to the bathroom. He turned around sharply and found Ren standing in his school uniform with his backpack already secured on his back.

"O-Oh, yeah. I'll be there in just a second," Makoto said, his eyes a little wide in surprise.

Ren hesitated—looking a little distressed—and then nodded, vanishing from the bathroom doorway. Makoto stared after him, his mind reeling.

Ever since the accident, Ren had become withdrawn and he rarely instigated any kind of communication. So hearing Ren talk to him first was quite a shock. It put a small smile on Makoto's face, knowing that maybe this was a step in the right direction towards recovery.

Makoto left the bathroom and headed to the front door, seeing Ren standing on the genkan with his shoes already on his feet. His hands were twisting the straps of his backpack and his brows were knitted together in a worrisome crease.

Makoto paused, eyeing his brother carefully.

While it did seem that Ren might have been opening up more, something still seemed off. When Ren finally noticed Makoto standing there, his back straightened and he pointed to the shoes on his feet.

"I'm all ready to go, Onii-chan. I think Ran's almost ready, too," he announced. Then, in a hushed voice, "So you won't be late…"

Ah.

So there was the answer.

Makoto smiled despite feeling guilt in his stomach for having his brother worry for him. He

approached Ren and patted his head to reassure him.

“I won’t be late, Ren,” Makoto assured. “Besides, my workplace is now in the same direction as your school. So it’ll be easier to get there.”

Ren lifted his head from underneath Makoto’s palm and stared up at him with big, brown eyes. He gave Makoto a small smile and nodded lightly. Makoto returned the smile.

Well, even if it’s not in the direction of recovery, Makoto thought, *it’s at least something.*

Ren still seemed to have troubles communicating but Makoto was willing to work with him. It was the opposite for Ran, who—

“I’m *reeeady!”*

—who seemed to get louder and louder every day.

“Ran, don’t be so loud!” Makoto scolded as she stepped onto the genkan to put on her shoes. He reached up to hold his tender head. He could feel another headache forming.

“What? I’m just letting you guys know I’m ready!” Ran said with a pout, her face suddenly pulled into a scowl.

“You don’t have to be so mean about it, Ran,” Ren mumbled.

“Eh? Mean? I’m not!"

Makoto internally groaned.

What was going on with these two?!

“All right, all right! Let’s just get you guys to school, okay?” Makoto said with a placating smile.

Ran folded her arms across her chest while Ren averted his eyes to stare at his shoes. Both of them looked equally miserable but they nodded in agreement.

“Okay, then. Let’s go,” Makoto said, leading them out of the apartment.

They headed down the same path that they take every morning. The only difference was that the sun had barely begun to peek in between the buildings of the city. The traffic was still busy, both on foot and by car, and Makoto made sure he stuck close to his siblings.

When the three of them finally reached the school, Makoto waved them off as usual, making sure to tell them to behave. Ren only nodded back without a peep and Ran rolled her eyes.

Makoto withered. They had both been in such a good mood that morning and all it took was a simple exchange of words for them to both crumble. He raised a hand to rub the back of his head where his headache started to bloom like a spring flower.

Mom, Dad… Makoto silently prayed. *How in the world did you do it?*

Once he had made sure that both Ran and Ren had made it inside, Makoto turned on his heel and walked back the one block to the restaurant. He put his hand on the door and took a deep breath.

Mom, Dad… he prayed again. *Give me strength.*

Makoto pulled open the door and stepped inside, gazing around the empty restaurant. Only a few lights had been turned on, mainly in the back. The atmosphere was eerie, to say the least, making Makoto feel on edge.

"U-Um… Nanase-san?" Makoto called out sheepishly.

He gingerly made his way back towards the kitchen, his hands tucked close to his chest. He could feel his heart pounding against his wrists as he walked through the kitchen door. The kitchen was also dark save for one light shining through the opened pantry door.

"N… Nanase-san?" Makoto called again as he walked towards the pantry.

When a shadow passed by the door, Makoto squeaked and froze in his tracks, his hands clenching his chest.

"H-Hello?" Makoto called out.

No response.

Was he just seeing things?

His mother had often told him that his brain played tricks on him, especially during stormy weather. But was this the same? Was the darkness just playing tricks on him?

He took another step closer.

It's just in your head, Makoto told himself. *Nanase is probably just in the pantry. He's just looking over things.*

Another step.

It's not like a stormy night, Makoto thought.

He reached out his hand to touch the doorknob.

Just my imagination.

He pulled open the door to the pantry, ready to greet his boss, but he froze on the spot.

The pantry was completely empty.

Eh? What?

Makoto gazed back and forth inside the pantry walls, his head whipping back and forth to scan the tiny space. But there was no one there.

Okay, don't panic, Makoto thought, even though his brain was completely spiraling into a state of panic. *I was just seeing things, just—*

"What are you doing?"

Makoto's heart nearly jumped out of his throat and he let out an embarrassing shriek.

He whirled around and planted his back against the doorframe behind him, staring wide-eyed at the source of the voice.

In front of him stood Nanase, donned in his white chef's uniform and wearing a stunned look on his face.

"O-Oh, Nanase-san…" Makoto breathed. He lifted up a hand to press it flat against his chest in an attempt to calm his pounding heart. "You scared me."

Nanase eyed him with a level stare, unblinking. Makoto could not tell if he was annoyed or bored.

"The truck is already here," Nanase said, pointing towards the back door with his thumb.

Makoto dropped his hand from his chest and straightened his back.

"O-Oh, of course!"

Nanase blinked at him and then turned around, leading Makoto through the back door and to the unloading area. The truck was backed up into the unloading zone with its back door already wide open, revealing boxes upon boxes of dry ingredients.

Makoto was in awe. Had Nanase unloaded all of this all by himself every week on top of running the kitchen?

"You'll have to unload all of the boxes first so the truck driver can be his way," Nanase said from behind.

Makoto turned his head to look at him and nodded in understanding. "Right."

"You can take the boxes straight into the back rooms where the pantries are and then start organizing them. I'm giving you full liberties to organize it any way you want. Just make sure it's neat and in a way where the chefs can find things easily," Nanase explained.

Makoto was a little taken aback. He had not heard Nanase speak so much at one time before.

"I'll help you for a little bit, so I can show you the best place to put the boxes," Nanase said, rolling up the sleeves of his uniform and climbing into the back of the truck.

Makoto watched as Nanase knelt down to grab a box and he quickly followed suit, climbing into the back of the truck and kneeling down next to a box. He grabbed one of the boxes in his grasp and lifted it onto another box, grabbing both of them at the same time.

"Just be careful. Some of them are a little…" Nanase stopped speaking when he saw Makoto holding two boxes in comparison to just his one. "…heavy."

Makoto could feel Nanase's heavy gaze on him as they both left the truck and headed towards the stockroom. They stacked their boxes onto the floor next to the pantries and went back for another load. Makoto, once again, grabbed two stacked boxes while Nanase grabbed only one, a slight crease in his brow.

"Were you an athlete at one time?" Nanase asked as they headed into the stock room.

Makoto almost dropped the boxes in his hands at the unexpected question but managed to save the boxes from hitting the ground. He turned his head and provided a shy smile.

"Ah, well, no," Makoto answered as he gently set down the stacked boxes. "But my best friend is an athlete, and he often dragged me to go work out with him."

Makoto smiled to himself sadly and rubbed the back of his neck. Sousuke *had* forced him to the

gym almost every afternoon when they began high school. Sometimes, Sousuke would even barge into his house on Saturday mornings and literally drag him from his bed. Makoto remembered fussing at him for interrupting his sleep.

He could practically hear Sousuke's voice booming in his ears.

"Oi, Tachibana, get your ass out of bed!"

"Eh? But, Sousuke, it's Saturday! Do we have to go to the gym? Why can't we just sleep?"

"I won't become an Olympic athlete by sleeping in."

"Can't you go by yourself?!"

Makoto's smile fell from his face.

If only being forced to go to the gym was the biggest of worries.

If only life could be as simple as they were back then…

Makoto shook his head, flinging the thoughts away, and then smiled at Nanase.

"But I haven't been going too regularly, so I'm sure I've softened up a bit," Makoto said with a light chuckle.

Nanase stared at him with his usual bored expression and Makoto almost sighed. He could not quite figure this guy out. Did his story bore him?!

Suddenly, the sounds of light chatting and doors closing echoed from the kitchen.

"The other chefs are arriving," Nanase said as he wiped off a few specks of dirt from his white uniform. He locked eyes with Makoto and gave him a hard stare. "I'm assuming you can handle things back here?"

Makoto stiffened, feeling a little on edge. Was he being released already? Would Nanase supervise him at all?

What if he messed up?

"O-Okay. Yes," Makoto said shakily.

Nanase hesitated, gazing at Makoto. His lips twisted a little as he turned to leave and he stopped in his tracks. He turned his head to peer back at Makoto with the softest eyes he had ever seen.

"You'll be fine," Nanase assured.

All it took were those three words to make Makoto's chest feel warm. He smiled brightly and bowed his head to Nanase.

"Thank you, Nanase-san," Makoto said, and he lifted his head. "I will do my best."

Nanase pursed his lips and averted his eyes. "Sure."

He headed out towards the kitchen when he stopped suddenly to look back at Makoto, his gaze back to its normal deadpan.

“By the way, your shirt is wrinkled in the back.”

“E-Eh?!”

“Hey, Mom, I think he’s waking up!”

“Oh? I think you’re right, Makoto.”

“Hey, Haru-chan! Haru-chan!”

“Don’t be so loud, Makoto. He’s probably in some pain.”

“O-Oh. Oops…”

“It’s all right, Makoto.”

“Um… can I give him a hug?”

“Just be gentle.”

“O-Okay. Haru-chan… I’m s-so glad you’re okay. Get better soon so we can play… okay?”

“**Our 2 O’clock reservation has arrived!**”

Haru snapped out of his daydream, the kitchen coming back into full view. He reached up and rubbed the side of his face at the announcement. The large party with the big-wig CEO was here. He had to make sure that his staff was alert and ready to please this customer.

He first turned to the waiter who made the announcement.

“Let all of the other waiters know and make sure that they all receive drink orders immediately,” Haru commanded.

The waiter bowed and said a quick, “Yes, sir,” before fleeing the kitchen.

Haru then turned to the rest of the kitchen staff.

“Get the soups ready. They all ordered a bowl as an appetizer,” Haru said.

“Yes, Nanase-san!” one of them responded.

He had the wait staff and the kitchen staff mostly informed. The word would spread to the rest of the floor and the busboys.

Which only left one person who had not had any kind of human interaction all day.

A little stab of guilt hit Haru right in the stomach. It was almost halfway through his shift and he was feeling responsible for leaving the guy alone for so long, especially on his first day.

Haru sighed and walked deeper into the kitchen. He needed to make sure that Tachibana was doing all right.

He rounded the corner and reached the main pantry. He noticed that the door was cracked open and he could faintly hear some rustling. Haru took some steps forward and opened up the door.

His eyes widened.

The floor was completely free of boxes and food, and the first shelf of the pantry was neatly organized into different sections. Everything on the shelf looked easy to find— everything appeared to be sorted by category.

Haru took a deep breath at the sight. It reminded him of his father.

“Ah, hello, Nanase-san.”

Haru glanced down to see Tachibana sitting on the floor with a bag of rice in his hands. He had a small smile on his face but his eyes and shoulders were drooping.

“It looks good in here,” Haru commented, trying to gauge Tachibana’s mood.

Tachibana smiled and reached up to rub the back of his head, his eye twitching slightly when his fingers touched his scalp.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m still trying to figure out the best way to sort everything. It’s a work in progress.”

Tachibana moved the bag of rice to the next shelf, making room in the bottom shelf. His arms slowly moved to the box on the first shelf, heaving it to the side with a soft grunt.

Haru’s brows furrowed. Tachibana’s movements were sluggish.

“Have you had a break since you got here?” Haru asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Tachibana glanced back at Haru with a surprised face.

“A break? Oh, uh… I guess not. Do I get breaks?” Tachibana asked.

Haru’s brow twitched and he lifted a hand to rub his forehead. A slight swell of guilt sat on his shoulders. How had he not explained to him that he got breaks?

“Of course you get breaks,” Haru said.

He bit his lip, feeling that he might have come across as too harsh. But Tachibana smiled and laughed softly, his hand coming up to rub the back of his head.

“Sorry! I suppose it was probably in the contract, right?” Tachibana said. “But I’m fine for right now. I’ve still got some more organizing to do.”

Tachibana moved the heavy box slowly to the other side of the shelf with a soft grunt. He heaved a sigh when the box was snug in the corner and then lifted a hand again to touch the back of his head. That was when Haru heard it.

A soft whimper.

Haru’s heart jolted at the sound and his eyes widened.

“Are you okay?” Haru asked. He felt like a parrot, always asking that question.

Tachibana massaged his scalp for a few moments and then turned to squint at Haru, a pained smile on his face.

“Ah, yeah,” Tachibana answered. “Just a headache.”

Haru’s eyes narrowed, staring at the hand that still rubbed the back of his head.

A headache? There?

He remembered those few encounters they had before, with Tachibana laying on the sidewalk, a hand rubbing his head. Or when he found him in front of the restaurant, his hands clutching his head as if he were in severe pain.

“Do you get those often?” Haru asked, leaning against the doorway to the pantry. He did not recall him ever complaining of headaches as a child.

Tachibana finally dropped his hand from his skull and turned around to move another box to the second shelf.

“Mmn. Well, they started last year,” was all he said.

Haru’s brows furrowed. Last year? What had happened last year?

He was about to ask when he saw Tachibana reach up and rub his head again, slowing down in his movements. Haru’s jaw clicked shut briefly and he sighed and folded his arms across his chest.

“Go take a break,” Haru commanded. “It’s past lunchtime anyways.”

Tachibana glanced back up at him, looking surprised. Haru pursed his lips and strained to roll his eyes. Why did he look so surprised?

“O-Okay. Thank you, Nanase-san,” Tachibana said, standing to his feet.

Haru walked out of the pantry area and back towards the kitchen with Tachibana in tow. He was about to go back to work when he heard Tachibana gasp behind him.

“Wow,” he said.

Haru glanced back at Tachibana and then followed his gaze out to the restaurant where all of the guests were seated. He noticed that the restaurant was fairly full and that the guests were all in business attire.

It was something that Haru was used to seeing—something that always made his sweat drop.

“It’s only lunchtime and it’s *this* crowded?” Tachibana asked.

Haru hummed. “We host several meetings for big corporations and strong businesses in Tokyo. We get reservations for a month out, sometimes,” Haru explained.

“B-Big corporations?” Tachibana asked nervously.

“Yeah,” Haru answered. He nodded towards the table in the corner. “That’s one of the best lawyers in Tokyo. He’s probably here with his client.” Haru then turned his head to a large group seated at a long table towards the center. “That’s the CEO of a popular department store chain that spread to other countries. He’s here with his advisors for a meeting.”

Tachibana looked stunned, his jaw dropped and eyes wide. He fidgeted with his pants, seeming to try and straighten out a stubborn crease.

“I-I can see why you want me to look presentable,” Tachibana said quietly, shyly. He seemed to shrink in on himself, suddenly looking overwhelmed.

“Don’t stress yourself out about it,” Haru said. “Your job has you out of sight most of the time, so it’s not like you’re a waiter or something.”

Haru’s lips twisted when Tachibana turned his face towards him.

There was dirt on Tachibana’s nose that he had not noticed in the dim lights of the pantry. He must have gotten some on him while unloading the truck.

“Although, you *do* need to make sure you don’t look dirty,” Haru said. He pointed to his own nose and stared at Tachibana with a deadpan expression. “You have something on your nose.”

Tachibana startled and raised his fist to wipe his nose with the back of his wrist. It ended up smearing the smudge of dirt over the bridge of his nose and onto his left cheek.

“D-Did I get it?” Tachibana asked.

Haru frowned and shook his head, making Tachibana blush furiously. He raised his hand to cover his face but it did not hide the blush that touched the tips of his ears.

“Just go wipe it off in the break room,” Haru commanded, giving Tachibana a slight push towards the door in the back corner.

Tachibana managed a light chuckle and hurried along to the back room. Before he disappeared into the break room, he gave Haru a thankful smile, that dirt on his nose still lingering.

Haru could not help but smile, remembering how clumsy Tachibana used to be as a kid.

It seems that not everything has changed about you, Makoto, Haru thought.

“Yo, Nanase!”

Haru’s smile fell from his face as he heard the manager calling him back to the kitchen. He turned around to find the source of the sound and saw the short man standing in front of him with a worried look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” Haru asked.

The manager sighed. “It’s about the food critic scheduled to come at the end of the month,” he said. “Just got a call that he wants to move up his reservation.”

Haru prickled. This particular food critic had been a thorn in his side ever since he opened the restaurant a year ago.

“Did you tell him we can’t just move around people’s reservations? It’s a busy month for businesses,” Haru said as calmly as he could, but he still tasted the venom leaking from his tongue on every word.

The manager nodded solemnly. “He’s persistent. But he’s been known to put restaurants out of business within just a week.”

Haru could feel a drop of sweat slide down his neck. “I’m aware.”

“What do you want to do?”

Haru bit his lips, his teeth working on the puffy flesh. His hands curled into tight fists and he sighed.

“We’ll see what we can do.”

Makoto wiped the dirt from his nose with a wet paper towel, eyeing himself closely in the mirror that hung in the break room. How in the world had dirt gotten there?

Once the smudge was gone, Makoto filled up a cup of water and then sat down at the table that rested near the lockers. He did not realize that he had worked through lunch– not that it had mattered, anyway. He did not pack a lunch for himself today because he had used the food for his siblings.

He sighed and leaned on the table, his stomach growling in protest. He opted for the cup of water in his grasp, hoping to satisfy the hunger for a little while. At least they would have enough for dinner that evening.

Makoto glanced around and finally noticed that he was alone. He took a sip of water, realizing that everyone must have taken their breaks already because of lunch. It had been nice to speak to Nanase, even if it had been just for a few minutes. But now that he was alone again, Makoto realized that his job was probably going to be a lonely one.

After another minute of self-deprecating thoughts, Makoto heard the door to the break room burst open.

“Hey, hey, Mako-chan!”

Makoto whirled around in his seat to see Nagisa and Rei at the door, both with sincere smiles on their faces. Even Rei looked more cheerful than this morning and it immediately brought a smile to Makoto’s face.

“Hi, guys!” Makoto greeted with a slight wave of his hand.

“How is your first day going, Tachibana-san?” Rei asked as he sat down across from Makoto. He had some menus in his arms and he gently laid them on the table.

“Ah, it’s going fine,” Makoto said with a smile. “A lot of heavy lifting, but it’s been fine.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. It’s one of truck days, right?” Nagisa said thoughtfully. “Haru-chan was really relieved that you took the job. He couldn’t get anyone to fill the job for the longest time.”

Makoto glanced at Nagisa curiously. “Really? Why is that?”

“Well, the job was assigned to someone from within the restaurant, but they couldn’t handle the responsibilities. So just two weeks ago, Haruka-san decided to try and hire someone from the outside,” Rei explained as he adjusted his glasses.

“Oh, wow. Well, I’m glad I could help him. He’s helped me out on more than one occasion,” Makoto said, smiling at them both.

“Haru-chan may seem prickly, but he’s actually really nice,” Nagisa explained.

Makoto gave him his classic head-tilt smile. “You and Nanase-san seem to be very close.”

Nagisa’s smile widened and he nodded. “Mmn! We went to high school together!”

Makoto immediately snapped to attention. Nanase in high school, huh? He wondered what kind of student he was like.

Those would probably be questions for another time.

“Really? High school? So you guys have been friends for a while,” Makoto said.

“Yeah! Then, he went off to university and I met Rei-chan in my third year,” Nagisa said, patting Rei on the shoulder. “And we ended up choosing the same university!”

“It’s been quite the adventure,” Rei said with a fond smile on his face.

“Wow,” Makoto said. “And Nanase-san was nice enough to hire you?”

Nagisa’s smile fell into a childish pout and he folded his arms across his chest.

“He still had to interview me and everything. He treated me as if we didn’t even know each other!” Nagisa whined.

“But doesn’t that make it unbiased?” Rei asked with a quirked brow.

“Details, details,” Nagisa said with a wave of his hand.

Makoto chuckled at their bickering.

This must be something they do often, he thought.

“So, what brings you guys back here? Are you on your breaks?” Makoto asked after he sipped his water.

Rei’s smile turned more excited. “Why, yes, we are! And—” Rei picked up the menus and pushed them over to Makoto. “We were wanting your opinion on these new menu designs.”

Makoto blinked down at the stack of menus in his hands, a little perplexed.

“New menu designs?” Makoto echoed.

“Yes, yes!” Nagisa answered. “Haru-chan wanted to get some new menu designs to cycle through for this month. He didn’t really give any details about it but he gave the job to us!”

“And we’ve picked out quite a few good backgrounds that I think would catch the customers’ eyes,” Rei said. He sat up straight with his arms folded confidently across his chest. “Please! Take a look and be amazed at my beautiful choices in designs!”

Rei let out a bark of laughter that made Makoto a little nervous, but he thumbed through the designs anyway. There were several designs that were extremely flashy and overwhelming. There was even a pattern with butterflies.

Where did he even find this thing?! Makoto thought as he slid the butterfly design far away from him.

The last menu was the one that caught Makoto's eye the most. It did not have a particular pattern or anything flashy, but it was sleek and subtle. It drew his eyes towards the food items on the page rather than the patterns in the background.

With a smile, he slid the menu forward to Rei and Nagisa.

"I like this one," Makoto said.

"Oh, oh! I knew he'd pick that one!" Nagisa said, pumping his fists.

Rei seemed okay with the decision but looked a little disappointed.

"Well, it's not the most beautiful design, but it *is* beautiful in it's own way," Rei said. "Good choice, Tachibana-san."

Makoto smiled and scratched his cheek. "Ah, thanks. But…" He paused and glanced down at the menus. "Why did you need *my* opinion? If Nanase-san assigned this job to you, shouldn't you be the ones to ultimately decide?"

Nagisa and Rei exchanged looks with each other before turning back to Makoto with smiles on their faces.

"Well, you see… with your job, you don't get to interact with a lot of people," Rei explained.

"And we thought that we could keep you company!" Nagisa added.

Makoto's eyes widened, his chest feeling warm and fuzzy all of a sudden. He smiled, feeling more and more thankful for Nanase's hospitality every day. If he had not hired him, then Makoto would not have been able to meet coworkers like these.

"Thank you so much," Makoto thanked with a slight bow of his head. "That was really too kind of you."

Nagisa patted his shoulder. "Nonsense! We're all here for each other, and you're just part of the family now."

Makoto's heart jolted at the word *family* but not in a negative way. He smiled at Nagisa brightly and nodded.

He was about to open his mouth to thank them again when the break room door burst open, and a grumpy-looking waiter stomped inside.

"Oi! Hazuki, Ryugazaki! I've finally found you two! You didn't request to be on break!" he barked.

Nagisa and Rei jumped to their feet, Rei scrambling to grab the menus from the table.

"Oops, we got caught," Nagisa whispered cheekily. He winked at Makoto and waved at him as they left. "Bye, Mako-chan!"

"Have a good rest of your shift, Tachibana-san," Rei said with a quick bow.

The two of them escaped through the break room door, the waiter waiting for them with angry eyes. He shot Makoto a glare before leaving the break room himself, slamming the door behind him on the way out.

Makoto jumped at the sound, the reverb going straight to his head. He reached up to rub the back of his head and sighed. That darned headache was so persistent. Maybe he should schedule an appointment with his doctor, after all.

He folded his arms over the table and rested his head down.

Just need some rest, Makoto thought as he closed his eyes. *Just a quick… nap…*

"Order ready for table 34!"

"Yes, sir!"

Haru finished plating the last of the fish and decorated the plate with some sauce. Little garnishes here and there and the plate was ready.

"Order for table 20!" Haru called out and placed the plate on the pick-up table underneath the heating lamps.

Nagisa swooped in and grabbed the plate with a smile.

"Ah, gotchya!" Nagisa said as he set it on his tray. "Oh, this looks like your tastiest one, yet, Haru-chan!"

"Mmn. Thank you," Haru said. He wiped off his hands and grabbed another plate. "Did you and Rei decide on those menus?"

Nagisa smiled brightly. "I think so! Mako-chan even helped!"

Haru's hands froze over the plate just as he was about to pour some sauce. He glanced up at Nagisa with sincere curiosity.

"You've spoken to him?" Haru asked.

Nagisa nodded cheerfully. "Rei-chan and I went to talk to him on his break. He seemed kind lonely so we wanted to get his opinion. And he picked the same one you picked, Haru-chan."

Haru's eyes widened and he placed the sauce back down on the counter. He glanced back at the pantry in the back. The light was off.

"When did you go talk to him?" Haru asked, keeping his gaze on the pantry.

Nagisa put a hand to his chin and glanced up at the ceiling.

"Hmm… about an hour ago," Nagisa answered.

Haru grimaced. Tachibana had not come back from his break, yet.

"Thank you, Nagisa," Haru said. Nagisa nodded and left the kitchen with the plates of food on his tray.

Haru released a nervous huff of air and set the plates aside. He turned to leave the kitchen and he quickly headed to the break room.

Had Tachibana fainted again? Or was his headache truly severe?

Or... worse?

Haru opened the door to the break room and stepped inside, unsure of what state Tachibana would be in. He just hoped that he would be all right.

But instead of a crumpled form, Haru found the boy in question with his head down on the table, fast asleep.

Haru's brow twitched.

Seriously? Haru thought as walked next to Tachibana. *So careless. Sleeping on your break. Don't you sleep enough at home?*

Haru peered down at his sleeping form, taking note of the uneven fall and rise of his back on every breath. His brows were pinched and his jaw was rigid, making everything about this impromptu nap tense and unpleasant.

Why do you look so tense? Haru thought. He vaguely wondered if Tachibana was in pain. He did mention a headache from earlier, but Tachibana had attempted to brush it off as if it were a normal occurrence.

Haru sighed, reaching up a hand to touch Tachibana's shoulder to wake him.

But then, a soft whimper escaped Tachibana's lips, and Haru's hand stopped cold.

Tachibana's shoulders started to quiver and his face was twisted in a painful grimace. His shaking form immediately pulled Haru back to his dream from the early morning.

Tachibana crying by his bedside.

His shoulders shaking and trembling fiercely.

Sobs wracking his tiny body.

And…

Tachibana's mother carding her fingers through his brown locks.

Should I…? Haru thought, his hand hovering over Tachibana's head. It shook lightly in the air over the brown hair before he pulled it back slightly.

This is ridiculous, Haru thought, about to retract his hand completely. *He is an employee. I should just wake him and have him get back to work.*

Haru leaned forward to shake Tachibana awake.

"Hey, Tachi—"

A louder whimper left Tachibana's mouth, and that was all it took.

Without even thinking, Haru gently placed his hand on Tachibana's head, his fingers running through his brown hair. Instantly, Tachibana's brows relaxed—no longer tensed and creased.

Soft, Haru thought. *Softer than I thought.*

He ran his hand down the side of Tachibana's head, near his ear, and his shoulders sagged against

the table. He was calming, much to Haru's relief.

Was he having a nightmare? Haru wondered.

He moved his hand towards the back of Tachibana's head, wondering if he could possibly ease the headache that had so badly hurt him earlier.

Haru's fingers moved to the back of Tachibana's skull, massaging it lightly. He heard Tachibana's breathing even out and he could see the tension loosening in the man's shoulders.

Well, if he was having a nightmare, at least it's calmed down now, Haru thought.

He was about to take his hand away when the tip of his middle finger felt a slight bump.

Haru jolted at the sensation but did not take his hand away.

What? A bump?

Haru rubbed his finger over it again to make sure it was not just a clump of hair. And sure enough, it was something underneath his hairline.

As quietly as he could, Haru leaned down to get a better look, gently pushing away Tachibana's hair.

Maybe it was just a knot in his hair, Haru hoped.

He moved another lock of hair.

Maybe it's nothing and my fingers are just numb from the day's work.

He pushed aside more hair, looking underneath.

Maybe it's just my imagina—

Haru's breath caught, hitching in his chest and twisting until it created a painful knot.

Underneath Tachibana's hair was a scar.

A *large* scar.

And there were tiny little white etchings in the skin that looked suspiciously like…

Staple scars?

Haru's fingers lightly shook as he moved the hair more to study Tachibana's scalp, taking note of the disfigured skin. It did not look like an old injury. It looked more… recent.

What on earth happened to you?

Suddenly, Tachibana stirred, his brows pinching and his mouth releasing a soft groan.

Haru snatched his hand back and stiffened, a maddening blush tainting his cheeks. He stared down at Tachibana as he slowly sat up and ran a hand through his hair.

"Ugh, it feels like I was hit with a dump truck…" he mumbled under his breath.

Haru blinked at him, feeling his face cool down from the embarrassment.

This is ridiculous.

After a deep breath through his nose, Haru cleared his throat loudly.

Tachibana squeaked and flinched in his seat, almost falling out of his chair. He gripped the table and whipped his head around to stare up at Haru with wide eyes.

"N-Nanase-san!" Tachibana exclaimed. His face flushed and he scrambled to his feet. "Sorry! I must've fallen asleep here. I didn't sleep through my shift, did I?"

Haru watched as the boy began to panic, frantically apologizing. He sighed and waved his hand, managing to somehow calm Tachibana more quickly than he expected.

"No, it's fine," Haru assured. He gazed over Tachibana's body, looking for any remaining signs of fatigue. "Are you okay?" he decided to ask.

Tachibana froze in place and stared up at Haru with widened eyes.

"I'm… I'm okay," Tachibana admitted. His shoulders stiffened up by his ears. "I guess I was just a little tired."

Haru sighed and placed his hands on his hips. "Well, make sure you get enough sleep at home before you come into work."

Tachibana nodded sadly. "Yes, I… wait." His eyes suddenly grew wide. "You're… you're not going to discipline me? Or…"

Or fire you? Haru thought, filling in the gaps.

"No," Haru answered. "It was your first day. And I wouldn't fire you for something like that. Besides, the pantry hasn't looked this good in months."

Tachibana paused, looking briefly shocked, before letting his shoulders collapse in relief. He put a hand on his chest and sighed.

"Thank goodness," he breathed. "I didn't want to mess up again."

Haru quirked a brow.

Again?

"Well, I, uh… I won't keep you. I'm sure you're busy," Tachibana said. He headed towards the door to the break room. "Thank you so much. And I'm really sorry for troubling you, it won't happen again."

Haru bit his lip.

You're not a trouble, he thought.

Haru watched as Tachibana left the break room, leaving him with more questions than answers.

I'm just… worried about you. What happened? What's that scar?

Why… why can't you remember me?

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Do you know where your love is?

Chapter Notes

Another chapter :)
Thank you all for the lovely comments and kudos! 100+ kudos?? That's so so crazy!
Thank you all so so much!
Thank you Tayu-Chan for editing this once again :)

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Huh?! What do you mean we can't stay home?!"

"I meant exactly what I said, Ran. You can't skip school today."

Ren sat quietly at the dinner table and nervously nibbled on his breakfast. His eyes darted back and forth between his parents and Ran, both seemingly at each other's throats. Ran had an angry look on her face, her hands curled into fists, while their parents just stared at her patiently.

"But Onii-chan is coming home today! I want to see him right now!" Ran said, folding her arms across her chest.

Ren jolted at her tone and flinched away, feeling tears brimming in his eyes. Why were they fighting?

"Ran, you'll get to see your brother when you get home from school," their mother said softly. "You have to go to school, Ran."

Ran tore her arms away from her chest and planted them by her sides as she stomped her foot.

"But—"

"Ran, we already told you," their father said sternly.

Their father glanced at Ren, and Ren ducked his head. He could feel the cool anger coming from his father's eyes.

"You need to behave more like Ren," their father said. "You don't see him complaining."

Ren gasped and stiffened. He could hear his heart pounding in his ears. Out of the corner of his eye, Ren could see Ran snap her head in his direction, and he froze up.

"The decision has already been made, Ran. You need to go to school like you would normally," their mother said. "Now, go get your shoes on and get ready for school."

Their mother and father stood up from the dinner table and gathered up the plates from breakfast.

"This isn't fair! Why am I the only one getting in trouble?!" Ran shouted.

"Ran, enough. This discussion is over," their father said as they placed their plates in the sink. "Go

get ready for school. Now."

Ran pouted and folded her arms across her chest, feeling completely defeated. She cut her eyes at Ren and gave him a deadly glare, making her twin flinch. Ren took a step back and he almost dropped his plate from breakfast.

"How about this," his mother started as she came back to the table. She placed her hands on their heads and smiled down at them gently. "How about I have your big brother pick you up from school today?"

Ren's face immediately lit up and he turned to look at Ran. She was still glaring, her pout turned into a scowl. She puffed out a harsh sigh and averted her eyes, her face softening only slightly.

"Whatever."

Ren pursed his lips, his fingers tapping on the white sketchpad in his hands.

It… doesn't look right, he thought.

The sketch that he had pored over for the past week was finally complete, although it was without any colors. Ren winced, remembering his shattered colored pencils that were hidden in a box under his bed. He remembered his teacher requiring that it be done in some sort of color but he hoped he could possibly explain his interpretation.

He sighed at the thought. He had to present his sketch today to the whole club, and those bullies would be there.

Ren sighed again, louder this time. This day was guaranteed to *suck.*

"Ran! Hurry up and get ready!"

Ren startled at the sound of his brother's voice echoing down the hall. He turned his back to the front door and glanced up to see Makoto coming towards him, his hands fiddling with the sleeves of his white button-up shirt.

"Ah, Ren. Good, you're ready," Makoto said with a smile. "Sorry that we have to leave so early. It's truck day again."

Ren shook his head and bit his lip, unable to find the words to properly convey his emotions to his brother. He decided to glance down at his sketch again and he pouted at the lumpy faces of his parents and siblings.

"Oh, did you finish?" Makoto asked, stepping behind Ren on the genkan to put on his shoes. Ren pushed the sketch to his chest and peered up at his brother with wide eyes. "Can I see?"

Ren hesitated, giving his brother a pleading look in the hopes that he would possibly change his mind, and then he gave in. He knew how stubborn his older brother could be. Sometimes even more stubborn than Ran.

With a great sigh, Ren lowered the sketch from his chest and held it at an angle for his brother to see. He could feel Makoto's shadow from over his shoulder and his voice reverberated in his chest.

"Wow, Ren," Makoto said. "This is really good!"

Ren's lip twisted and he averted his eyes. "I messed up on the faces."

"Eh? Really?" Makoto asked, genuinely looking confused. "It doesn't look like it to me."

"That's because you stink at drawing, Onii-chan!" Ran said teasingly as she rounded the corner.

Makoto chuckled lightly and scratched his head. "Well, yes. But I think Ren's skills have really improved. Everything looks so realistic."

Yeah, except for the lopsided eyes and puffy cheeks, Ren thought sadly.

He could hear his older brother humming as he studied his sketch further while Ran slipped past them both to put on her shoes.

"Were you going to add color to it?" Makoto asked.

Ren could feel his heart jolt inside his chest and he whipped his head up to give his brother a shocked expression. He blinked rapidly, trying to reel in his emotions and hide his fear.

"I-I was, uh… trying to give it a more… monochromatic feel to it," Ren said, his face wincing at his own weak explanation.

Makoto hesitated and then his face scrunched up in confusion.

"Mono… what?" Makoto asked.

"Monochromatic!" Ran repeated. "It means using just one color! Geez, Onii-chan. You really did stink at art class, didn't you?"

"*Ran!"* Makoto whined, making Ran laugh. "I… I did just fine, thank you very much!"

"Heh? Who helped you? Sou-nii-chan? He was just as bad as you!"

"Hey, now. Respect your elders!"

Ren sighed and flipped his sketchpad closed with a light slap. He pulled his backpack off of his shoulders and slid the sketchpad inside, watching his siblings out of the corner of his eye. His older brother had his arm thrown around Ran's shoulders and both were smiling.

But he knew it would not last.

Ren sighed, pulling the backpack over his shoulders once again, and waited impatiently. If they did not hurry, then his brother would be late…

Ugh, this is torture, Ren thought.

When his siblings stopped goofing off, Makoto was the first to speak.

"Okay, okay. You guys ready to go?" Makoto asked as he pulled on his jacket over his shoulders.

"Yes!" Ran announced.

Ren nodded, the relief smoothing out his shoulders.

Finally, he thought. *Now Onii-chan won't be late.*

They left the apartment in high spirits. Ran and Makoto were chatting amicably about the restaurant and Makoto's new job. Ren could tell that his older brother enjoyed his job so far. It had

only been about a week, but he seemed to relax more lately. And he attempted to cook more at home, too. He talked about his coworkers with a smile on his face.

But…

Ren's brows furrowed and his bit his lip as he glared at the sidewalk.

There was still something… off… about his older brother's smiles. Ren wondered if Makoto was still upset that he lost his old job. Did he resent them for making him late so many times?

If Ren had not cried that morning… if he had not complained about going to school… if he had not made Makoto—*stubborn, dumb, loving, comforting Onii-chan*—wipe his tears away…

…then would his older brother still have his old job?

Would he be promoted by now?

Ren's hands clenched the straps of his backpack, hearing the fabric stretch and rip. He let out a soft gasp and immediately loosened his death grip on the already–worn straps of his backpack. He did not want to make his brother spend another dime on his behalf.

He sighed, again.

It was not just clothes or food or backpacks or colored pencils…

Was… was he being a burden?

"Ren?"

Ren was yanked from his thoughts by a soothing voice from beside of him. He blinked rapidly, the sidewalk coming into view. He glanced up to see Makoto peering at him with a curious expression on his face.

"Are you okay? You've been really quiet," Makoto said, his brows lowering in concern.

Ren bit his lip harder.

I really am *being a burden!*

"He's always quiet, Onii-chan!" Ran whined. "It's like he's mute."

Makoto regarded her with a stern expression as a warning but Ran just shrugged and nodded her head back to Ren.

"See? He's not even defending himself," Ran said tersely. She pouted and looked away, her eyes suddenly growing sharp. "All he does is cry, anyways."

Ren's heart lurched when he saw his older brother's face twist into shock. Ren puffed out his chest and glared at Ran, finally finding his voice.

"I do *not!"* Ren barked back.

Makoto snapped his head back to look at Ren, his brows raised and jaw dropped.

"You do, too! It's how you always get your way!" Ran protested.

Ren flinched back, his jaw dropping. "W-What?" he asked.

"All right, all right, that's *enough*," Makoto said, placing a hand on their shoulders and separating them. "You guys need to work out whatever this is, okay? No more fighting."

Ren glanced up at his older brother and nodded glumly. Ran huffed out a groan and snapped her gaze away, making both Ren and Makoto flinch.

After that small dispute, the three of them walked in uncomfortable silence until they reached the gate of their school. Ran stormed on ahead without a word, leaving Makoto and Ren standing by the entrance.

Makoto sighed, shaking his head, and then glanced down at Ren.

"I'll try to talk to her later," Makoto said.

Ren squirmed in place, lowering his head. He nodded, his eyes staring at the space in between his shoes. He took a heavy step forward towards the school, the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Ren."

Suddenly, there was a hand on his shoulder and he stumbled to a stop. He glanced back up at his brother who was eyeing him with a worried expression.

"You'd tell me if something was bothering you… right?" Makoto asked.

Ren's eyes widened a little.

Ran's attitude.

His failed art project.

Those three bullies.

Mom and Dad.

Those expensive colored pencils.

Big brother's job, big brother's job, big brother's job…

Guilt.

Guilt.

All your fault.

Ren looked away from his brother's eyes and towards the school's front doors.

"Yeah," Ren said with a nod.

Makoto's hand squeezed Ren's shoulder as if he were reluctant to let go. But after a moment, Makoto released his shoulder.

"Okay," he responded. Ren could hear the uncertainty in his voice but he decided to ignore it. "Well, I'll be here when you're done with your clubs. Have a good day, Ren."

Ren nodded without looking at his brother and he headed towards the front door.

"Bye, Onii-chan."

"You shouldn't have made them mad, Ran."

"Eh?"

Ren and Ran made their way to their classroom after lunch. Neither one of them had really said a word to each other since their dispute from the kitchen table at breakfast that morning. Ran had been unusually grumpy and cold, choosing to hang out with other friends instead of Ren.

"What are you talking about?" Ran asked as she took her seat at her desk.

Ren stayed by her side at her desk. "I'm talking about this morning with Mom and Dad. You made them upset!"

"I did not!" Ran shouted back. She folded her arms on her desk and glared down at them. "I just wanted to see Onii-chan. I thought you would want to see him, too."

Ren's face fell, his brows pinching together. "Of course I want to see Onii-chan! But we can't just skip school. I promised I would work hard for Onii-chan while he was gone because you said he was going to work hard, too."

Ran's lips pursed and she sighed, turning her head away to see the rest of the class filing in.

"I know," she huffed. "It just isn't fair. Mom and Dad got to take off work to see him, so why can't we take off school?"

Ren's fingers fidgeted with the hem of his shirt as he stared down at Ran, unable to provide an answer. He started a few times to say something, opening and shutting his mouth like a gaping fish, until their teacher entered the room and told everyone to sit down.

Ren hesitated by Ran's desk and then finally gave in, trudging over to his seat.

Class began for a while, Ren barely glancing at the board and watching the numbers appear from the chalk in his teacher's hand. He sighed, ready to fall asleep, when there was a knock on the door.

The teacher abruptly stopped speaking, placing his chalk down, and then he headed to the door. He slid open the door to the classroom to reveal a teacher from the front office. The man leaned forward and whispered something into their teacher's ear.

After a moment, their teacher inhaled sharply and then turned back to gaze into the classroom. He quickly regained his composure and the nodded to the teacher at the door.

The class was curious now, all engaged and waiting to hear what their teacher had to say. He walked up to the front of the classroom and leaned on his podium.

"Tachibana Ren and Ran, you need to gather up your things. You're being picked up early today," their teacher said.

Ren glanced over to Ran, giving her an excited look. She smiled back at him and nodded.

No doubt— it was definitely Onii-chan!

They quickly grabbed their bags and hurried down the hall to the main office.

"Onii-chan! Onii-chan!" Ran sang as she skipped down the halls.

"I can't believe he's here to pick us up early!" Ren said, struggling to keep up with her. "I can't wait to show him all of my drawings!"

"Well wait in line, because I'm gonna be the first to…"

The twins skidded to a stop when they saw a familiar face in the office of their school. But it was not the face of their older brother.

"Sousuke-nii-chan?"

As Ren headed down to the cafeteria with his bento in hand, he felt nervous. His fingers wrenched on the green cloth that held his lunch together and he bit the inside of his cheek.

He vaguely wondered if Ran would sit with him today.

After he entered through the doors to the cafeteria, Ren pushed his way through the crowd of students waiting in line and headed towards the tables. His eyes darted back and forth from table to table, studying the faces of each student. He recognized some of his classmates but he rarely spoke to any of them unless they needed to work together on a project.

Ren sighed and turned his head to look at the corner of the cafeteria. His breath hitched when he saw three familiar faces all sitting together at the long table. They were the three upperclassmen from the art club that have been giving him the most trouble this school year.

Ren grimaced and turned away from the table, desperately hoping not to be spotted, and walked past some full tables. His eyes scanned the seats as he walked by.

Where are you? Ren thought.

After a few more paces, Ren came to a full stop, his eyes landing on another familiar face.

Ran was sitting with some of the girls from her class, her lips pulled into a smile. The girls would point to someone and whisper to each other, laughing afterward.

Ren frowned. It was obvious they were making fun of someone. Why was Ran hanging out with people like that? She never used to.

What on earth happened?

Ren's train of thought stopped when he saw an empty seat at their table and he took a step forward.

As soon as he took that step forward, Ran's head snapped towards him and she stared at him with wide eyes. Ren stopped in his tracks and stared back, his eyes flitting to the empty chair next to his sister.

Ran glanced over to the chair next to her, seeing that it was empty, and then glanced back at Ren. Her brows lowered and her lips fell into a scowl. She shook her head and wrapped her arm around the back of the chair to hog it.

Ren winced and took a step backwards, staring at his sister with pleading eyes. Ran had never denied him a seat before. Sometimes, when he had eaten lunch with her before, Ran would just ignore him. But this was the first time that Ran had not allowed her brother to sit with her.

Ren's head lowered to gaze at the ground and his chin wobbled. He turned around and spotted an empty table in the back and hurried over to sit down. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand to dry his tears.

Don't cry.

He took a deep breath and forced it all out in one puff of air. Then, he glanced back up and opened his bento, digging into the burned fish and rice that his brother had lovingly made for him.

It tasted delicious.

"Sousuke-nii-chan?"

Sousuke was standing at the front office with his fists by his sides. His face was a little pale and his eyes were darkened. He looked haggard.

Ran rushed up to his side and tugged on his wrist.

"What are you doing here?" Ran asked, her voice chirpy.

Ren also moved up to his side and reached out to grab Sousuke's other free hand but stopped short when he got a good look at Sousuke's face. He was not wearing his usual scowl. It was something else.

Something darker.

"Ran, Ren," Sousuke started, his voice breathy and low. He took a choked breath and visibly swallowed. "Something, uh… something happened. We need to go."

Ren's heart jolted at Sousuke's tone and he shrunk into himself. Ran let go of Sousuke's wrist and took a few steps backwards, staring up at Sousuke with wide eyes.

"W-What happened?" Ran asked.

Sousuke opened and shut his mouth, a hand coming up to run his fingers through his hair. He released a shuddering breath, and Ren could see his fingers shake lightly.

"Sousuke-nii-chan, you're scaring me…" Ren whispered.

Sousuke sighed and knelt down to them, placing his hands on their shoulders.

"I need you two to listen very carefully," Sousuke said.

Ren felt tears forming in the corner of his eyes but he tried to hold himself together.

"Your parents and Makoto are in the hospital. They were in a car accident," Sousuke said.

The twins both inhaled sharply, Ren reaching over to grab onto Ran's sleeve. They stared up at Sousuke with creased brows and wide eyes.

"Are… are they okay?" Ran asked, her voice trembling.

Ren jumped at the sound, his eyes immediately filling with tears. He turned his head away to hide his face and he sniffed.

Was this really happening?

"I don't know, Ran," Sousuke said. He stood up and released their shoulders. "I'm here to take you to the hospital. My car is in the parking lot, so let's go."

Ren and Ran exchanged worried looks with each other and then cautiously followed Sousuke out to the parking lot. They both got into the back of his small, black sedan and placed their backpacks in the empty seat in between them.

"Buckle up," Sousuke said softly as he started the car.

Ren quickly buckled up his seatbelt, fighting back nervous tears. He glanced up at Ran to see if she was as distraught as he was, but was surprised at what he saw.

Ran's eyes were glued to the back of Sousuke's seat. She was neither crying nor upset.

If anything, she looked frustrated.

Ren sat down at his table in the art club room, his sketchpad on his lap. His teacher was going over the requirements for the art competition project that was coming up soon. Ren's lips twisted. He wanted to enter the competition but felt insecure about his skills. Sure, his older brother said his drawings were phenomenal. But his brother was obligated to say things like that.

"Here are the forms to sign up for the competition," his teacher said, placing down the forms on her desk. "The deadline to submit an art piece is in three months, so get started as soon as you can."

The teacher turned around from her desk and then placed her hands on her hips.

"Now, we need to continue our presentations of the sketch assignment. Ren."

Ren jolted in his seat and glanced up at his teacher, his eyes wide.

"Y-Yes?" he answered.

"Do you have your new sketch?" his teacher asked.

Ren's brows scrunched up in worry but he managed to nod. He grabbed his sketchpad and flipped it open to the correct page and then handed it to her. His teacher grabbed the sketchpad and studied it with a hand on her chin.

"Hm. I think I understand. Go ahead and present it to the rest of the club," she said, handing the sketchpad back to Ren and then gesturing towards the front of the classroom.

Ren took the sketchpad gingerly and then walked up to the front of the classroom. He glanced around the room, his eyes drawn to the three upperclassmen in the corner. They were staring at him with condescending smirks on their faces. Ren gulped, feeling shivers shooting down his spine.

He took a deep breath, and then he turned the sketchpad around to face the class.

"Um… my word was *Home.* And, um…" Ren bit his lip, his fingers shaking slightly. "I decided to do a sketch of my… of my family."

He heard a few snickers coming from the corner and he jolted, bringing the sketch closer to his chest. He wanted to hide behind it.

"Why did you choose to do the sketch without any color?" his teacher asked.

Ren glanced at her and hesitated. How could he explain why he did not use colors? It was not as if he could tell her that he did not have any colored pencils at home. It was expected that he have all of the supplies needed for the club.

"Um…" Ren stuttered. "I, uh… well, you see… m-my parents… th-they…"

He could feel his throat tighten as he kept speaking, his eyes brimming with sudden tears. He sniffled quietly, wanting nothing more than to just fall through the floor.

"Hey, hey." There was a whisper from the back. "The crybaby is doing what he does best. Look, look!"

Ren bit his lip and took a slow breath through his nose.

Don't cry, don't cry…

He glanced back up at his teacher.

"I just… I just wanted to give it a different style," Ren said lamely.

His teacher cocked her head at him curiously, her eyes flitting down to his sketch. She gave a small smile, almost out of pity, and patted his shoulder.

"I see. Well, I think adding some color to it would bring the sketch to life. Add some color to the next assignment. And…" The teacher leaned down to whisper in his ear. "Keep working on your faces. They're getting better, but they could still need some work."

Ren heard some snickering coming from the corner and he flushed in embarrassment. He quickly turned the sketch around to hide it against his chest and he nodded glumly. He rushed to his seat, mortified, and placed his sketchpad face down on the table. He swallowed thickly and hung his head to stare at the tile floor.

Don't cry, don't cry…

Ren could vaguely hear the teacher calling up the next student to present, and a girl stood up with her sketchpad. She stood up in front of the class and explained her sketch but Ren did not hear a single word of it.

"We're here for the Tachibana family."

Ren and Ran stared up and watched as Sousuke spoke softly to the woman at the desk. Sousuke had taken them directly to the hospital. The car ride was quiet and tense, and Ren noticed Sousuke's hands gripping the steering wheel tightly the whole way.

"Give me one moment, please," the woman said as she tapped something on her computer. "Ah, yes. Here we are. Let's see… oh."

The woman suddenly looked pale and she snapped her gaze up to look at Sousuke with creased brows.

"Are you family?" she asked.

Sousuke shook his head.

"No, I'm a family friend." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and pointed towards Ran and Ren. "But I have their children with me."

The woman moved her head to the side to peer down at Ran and Ren and then she looked back to Sousuke. She leaned forward slightly and motioned for Sousuke to come closer. She put up her hand and whispered something in his ear.

Ran and Ren watched as Sousuke jerked back and gasped, his eyes widening.

"A-Are you sure?" Sousuke asked.

The woman nodded sadly and then glanced over to Ran and Ren. "I wasn't sure if… if they wanted to hear that from me."

Sousuke turned back to look at Ran and Ren with an expression that they had not seen before. It made Ren feel terrified.

Suddenly, Sousuke whirled back around to face the woman behind the desk.

"Okay, but… but what about their son that was with them? What about Makoto?" Sousuke asked.

The woman gazed back at the computer and squinted.

"He's still in surgery," she said softly. She glanced back up at Sousuke. "I can take you to the waiting room near the recovery wing if you'd like."

Sousuke ran his fingers through his hair and released a shaking sigh. He nodded and hummed in agreement.

The woman nodded, walking out from behind the desk, and then gestured towards the hallway.

"Follow me," she said.

Sousuke turned to the twins and placed his hands on their backs, gently pushing them forward.

"C'mon. We're going to wait for your big brother," Sousuke said, his voice a little strained.

Ren glanced up at Sousuke as they walked.

"What about Mom and Dad?" Ren asked.

Sousuke winced and grit his teeth. "We'll… we'll see them later."

Ren's heart squeezed. Sousuke's face looked so scared and sad. He just wanted to know what was going on.

He glanced at Ran, who had been eerily quiet this whole time. She had her eyes glued to the floor as she held onto Sousuke's hand. Her face looked tired except for the slight crease in her brow, and her lips were pulled into a tight line.

Ren bit his lip. He opened his mouth to call Ran's name but was interrupted when the woman directed them to the small waiting area.

"I'll have a nurse come and inform you if there are any changes," the woman said to Sousuke.

Sousuke bowed his head slightly. "Thank you."

The woman bowed in return and then left, leaving Sousuke to direct the twins over to a couch that sat against the wall. He sighed and leaned forward on his knees, his leg slightly bouncing and his hands shaking.

"Sousuke-nii-chan…" Ren called, tugging on Sousuke's sleeve. "W-What's going on? Where's Onii-chan?"

Ran glanced up and looked at Sousuke at her brother's question, watching as Sousuke ran a hand down his face.

"They said he's in surgery," Sousuke said.

"Surgery?" Ren echoed.

Sousuke nodded. "We just… have to wait for now, okay?"

Ran and Ren exchanged worried looks with each other and nodded, sitting with their hands in their laps and staring at the tiles on the floor.

They waited for what seemed like an eternity. The twins were reduced to laying their heads on Sousuke's lap, fighting off sleep. Sousuke remained unnervingly still with his back stiff against the couch cushions. Ren would glance up at him every once in a while to see his stern eyes staring directly at the doorway. His arms were folded across his chest and his jaw was set. Sousuke seemed like his usual, grumpy self, but Ren could see the worry in his teal eyes.

After about another hour of waiting, a nurse in scrubs came into the waiting room with a clipboard in hand.

"Is anyone here for Tachibana Makoto?" she asked.

Ran and Ren jolted upright into a sitting position, allowing Sousuke to stand to his feet and rush over to the nurse's side.

"Yes, we're here for him. How is he?" Sousuke asked, his voice laced in concern.

Ran and Ren ran up to Sousuke's sides and grabbed onto his shirt, their fists wrinkling the fabric, and they looked up at the nurse with wide eyes.

"He's out of surgery now and is recovering in his own room. We'll have to keep him for a week or so to monitor the progress of his injuries," the nurse said.

"What are his injuries?" Sousuke asked.

The nurse sorted through the clipboard in her hands and flipped back a couple of pages.

"Well, the main injury was to his head. He has a fractured skull and a severe concussion. He also has two broken ribs," the nurse said.

Ren saw Sousuke's hand flinch slightly before his fingers curled into a shaking fist.

The nurse lowered her clipboard, letting the papers fall back into place, and then she glanced back up at Sousuke.

"He also has several cuts and bruises all over his body, but those have been treated and are not life-threatening," the nurse said. "He should recover as long as his brain doesn't swell. That's why we need to watch him for the next week."

Ran and Ren exchanged confused looks. What exactly was wrong with their older brother?

"He has not woken up, yet, but would you like to see him?" the nurse said.

Sousuke jolted and nodded immediately. "Yes. Yes, of course."

"Then please follow me."

The nurse led them out of the waiting room and down a hallway towards some numbered rooms. The twins gripped onto Sousuke's hands, feeling scared with every step. When they reached the room, Ran pulled back on Sousuke's hand and stopped just outside the door.

"Is… is Onii-chan going to be okay?" Ran asked, speaking up for the first time since they left school.

Sousuke's hands squeezed both of theirs before he let go and knelt down to them.

"He will be fine, just fine. But I need you two to listen, okay?" Sousuke said. He continued after the twins nodded. "Your brother hurt his head really badly, and he is probably sleeping now. I need you guys to be careful when you go near him. And… he might look a little different. Prepare yourselves… okay?"

Ran and Ren winced, both of their eyes filling with tears, but they nodded. Sousuke nodded back and stood back up. He led them into Makoto's room.

All three of them froze at the sight.

Makoto was lying on the hospital bed with a large bandage wrapped around his head, a few of his brown hairs poking out of the front over his forehead. He had a tube in his mouth and wires were coming from everywhere.

He was not moving.

"Makoto," Sousuke whispered, rushing to his best friend's side. His hands hovered over Makoto's arm for a moment before he let them drop onto his cold skin. "Makoto…"

Sousuke lowered his head, and the twins heard his breath hitch. Their eyes widened when they saw a few tears sliding down Sousuke's cheek.

Ran and Ren stood frozen.

They had never seen Sousuke cry before.

Ren sighed as he reached his shoe locker. It had been a long, agonizing, and lonely, lonely day. He felt so frustrated at Ran for ignoring him. He had done nothing to provoke her that morning. She had, in fact, started the quarrel that made everything so awkward on the way to school.

You're being unfair, Ran, Ren thought. He sighed again when he let his street shoes drop to the floor and he started to shuffle out of his school pair.

Suddenly, his backpack was ripped from his shoulders, and the force made him fall to the ground. He landed hard on his forearms and he whipped his head up to see all of the contents from his backpack being dumped onto the floor.

"Let's see, what do we have here?"

Ren glanced up further to see the three faces he had tried to avoid all day. The three bullies from the art club were hovering over him and searching through his things on the floor. Immediately, Ren clammed up and scooted away from them. The fear had seized his body and his legs refused to move.

"Hey, here it is!"

One of them picked up Ren's sketchpad and flipped through it, landing on the page where Ren had drawn his family for the club project. He tore out the page and lifted it up for his friends to see.

"Look, look! Their faces are really lumpy, just like we thought!"

"Oh, wow! Hey, how did you get it to look so terrible?"

Ren lifted up his hand and reached out to the sketchpad as if to stop him, but he froze when he heard the sound.

Riiiiiip.

Ren's eyes widened in horror as he watched his sketch fall in pieces onto the ground by his feet. The drawing of his brother's face had completely ripped in half while his parent's bodies were wrinkled. He and Ran were on separate pieces altogether.

Why? Ren thought. *Why did this have to happen?*

"Oh, look. He's going to cry again."

"It's not surprising. He does this all the time."

"Oh, yeah, yeah! I think his sister even says so!"

Ren jumped at the mention of his twin sister.

Even you, Ran?

"No way! She said that about him?"

"Yeah, I think so. Even if she didn't, he still does cry all the time."

"Ah, you're right. Every single day. Does he even have friends?"

Ren shut his eyes tight as they stung with fresh tears. He sniffed and hung his head to hide from his attackers.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't—

"HEY!"

Ren's eyes snapped open when he heard a familiar voice, a voice that he had not heard all day.

And suddenly, one of the bullies was pushed back into the rack of lockers, his back hitting with a loud clack. Ren glanced up to see his twin sister standing in front of the bullies, her hands curled into tight fists.

"Back off!" she shouted.

The other two bullies took steps back towards the lockers, their faces twisted into scowls. The one who Ran had shoved took a step from the lockers and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"Why don't you just defend yourself, huh? This girl is always acting as your bodyguard," he spat at Ren.

Ren flinched at his tone and glanced up at Ran. Ran glanced down at him, eyeing him with a harsh scowl.

The one upperclassman sighed and glanced to his friends, nodding towards the exit.

"Let's go."

When they were out of sight, Ren scrambled onto his hands and knees and picked up the pieces of his sketch, trying to prevent more tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Are you really crying?" Ran asked dully, her voice low and bored.

Ren sniffed loudly as he shoved the pieces into his backpack without a second glance and wiped off his face. He stood up and stuffed his feet into his shoes before looking up at Ran, who was looking back at him with a cold stare.

Frustrated, Ren shoved his school shoes into his locker and slammed it shut. He readjusted his backpack over his shoulders and stormed past Ran without a word. He heard Ran release a loud sigh before he could hear her trailing footsteps echo in the room.

At the gate, their older brother was waiting patiently with a small smile on his face and a bag in his hand. His smile widened when he saw them getting closer and he waved at them in greeting.

"Hi, guys," Makoto said when they got close. "How was your day?"

Ran and Ren exchanged a look and then quickly averted their eyes.

"Fine," they both answered simultaneously.

Makoto chuckled and nodded. Then, he lifted up the bag in his hand, and Ren recognized it as a takeout bag.

"My boss gave me some leftovers for dinner. It turns out to be some of your favorites," Makoto said.

The twins both snapped their heads to look at their older brother in amazement. And in an instant, their day had completely changed.

"Our favorites?!" Ran chirped. She had her usual, upbeat smile on her face. "What is it? Is there dessert?"

Makoto chuckled and nodded. "Yes, yes, there's some dessert in there."

Ren finally smiled, his chest feeling a tad bit warmer. It was amazing how even in tough situations, their older brother somehow managed to make them both smile and cheer up. And all it took were a few words and a bright smile.

It had been hours.

Ren was not sure how long they had sat in his older brother's room, but it was late at night. The sun had disappeared long ago, and Sousuke had brought them to the cafeteria to grab some prepackaged sandwiches to eat for dinner. Even after they had eaten, they waited even longer. Ren was unsure what exactly they were waiting for, but they still just waited patiently and quietly until they drifted in and out of sleep.

Ren had woken up to the sounds of nurses coming in an out of the room. For some reason, they had removed the tube coming from Makoto's mouth while he had been asleep. He remembered hearing the nurse mumbling something about him breathing on his own but Ren could barely hear it.

Sousuke had not moved from his spot by Makoto's bed. His hand was still gripping Makoto's, and his head was resting on the bed by Makoto's arm. Ren wondered if Sousuke's back was hurting from being slouched over for so long. It was something his mother had often warned him about.

Speaking of his mother…

Where was she? And his father?

Ren sighed and glanced over to see his sister still fast asleep. He gingerly stood up from the couch to walk by Sousuke's side. He eyed his brother's face for a moment, noticing the bruises by his temples and nose, and then glanced down at Sousuke.

"Is Onii-chan going to be okay, Sousuke-nii-chan?" Ren asked.

Sousuke tilted his head on the bed to get a better look at Ren. His eyes were droopy and red, and there were dark bags hanging underneath of them. Sousuke smiled a little and sat up, but his hand did not let go of Makoto.

"He should be fine, Ren," Sousuke said. He chuckled a little and rubbed the side of his face. "Your brother is more stubborn than he looks. He'll pull through this."

"Who… are you calling… stubborn?"

Both Sousuke and Ren jumped at the sound and whipped their heads around to see a familiar face smiling back at them. They both gasped.

Makoto was awake.

"Makoto!" Sousuke shouted, standing to his feet.

He leaned over Makoto and cupped his cheek, gazing down at his face.

"You're… you're awake," Sousuke mumbled.

Makoto let out a soft chuckle and smiled. "It seems so."

"Are you feeling okay?" Sousuke asked, reached up with his free hand to cup Makoto's other cheek. "And don't lie to me. I can tell when you're lying."

Makoto chuckled weakly again. "I… I don't feel terrible. Just… really sore. And I have a slight headache."

Sousuke stared at him for a moment with scrutinizing eyes before releasing his face.

"Fine. I'll believe you," Sousuke said.

Ren watched them interact, tears spilling from his eyes. This was the older brother he recognized. A smiling, happy, laughing brother. For some reason, it made his heart hurt.

"O-Onii-chan…" Ren whimpered.

Makoto and Sousuke abruptly stopped talking to gaze over at Ren's crying face. Makoto's eyes widened a bit and then he smiled.

"Ren," Makoto called. He gently lifted his hand and placed it on Ren's head. Ren watched his every move. "I missed you so much."

The tears in Ren's eyes doubled as he began to sob, his breath hitching with every painful hiccup. He closed his eyes and felt his older brother's hand move down to the side of his face. He felt Makoto's thumb sluggishly wipe away a few tears.

"It's okay, Ren," Makoto said softly. "Don't cry."

"Don't cry."

"Don't… cry."

Ren jolted awake with a light gasp. He sat up and glanced around. He was in his bedroom, with Ran sleeping in her bed across the room.

Ren breathed slowly, placing a hand to his racing heart. He had not dreamt about that night in a long time. He hated thinking about it.

It was the night when his life had changed forever.

Something felt cool on his cheeks and Ren reached up to touch his face. When he pulled his hand down, his noticed that his fingers came back wet.

Huh? Ren thought.

He reached up again to wipe his face and realized that they were tears. He sniffed and wiped off his face, his chest constricting painfully as the weight of his dream came crashing down on him.

I'm sorry, Onii-chan, Ren thought as he desperately tried to wipe the tears away.

But I can't stop crying.

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Do you think that you lost it?

Chapter Notes

Another chapter for you :)

HUGE thanks to Tayu-chan for helping me brainstorm and her lovely editing job. I seriously could not have done it without you!!

Also, holy cow! Your comments and kudos are all so amazing and encouraging. It really warms my heart so much and I appreciate every word.
Everyone, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ah, Aki-chan! Sorry! I was looking at a cat and… hey, what's the matter? Where's…"

The girl sniffed, her hands leaving the bars of the bridge to come up to wipe the tears from her eyes. She glanced up at Makoto with teary eyes.

"M-My scarf flew off a-and it f-fell and… h-he jumped in to grab it but… he hasn't come back up, yet."

Makoto's eyes widened and he turned to stare at the river below. It was a little choppier than usual and the sight made his stomach quiver. His body shook lightly but he clenched his fists and scanned the water for any signs of his best friend.

"How long ago did he jump in?" Makoto asked, turning back to look at Aki.

She fidgeted with the hem of her jacket before darting her eyes around. She opened her mouth with a quivering jaw.

"I-I dunno… maybe a few minutes ago?" she said.

Makoto did not have to think twice.

He grabbed the bars of the bridge and hoisted himself up and flung himself over the edge.

"Tachibana-kun!" Aki shrieked from behind.

Makoto plunged into the river, feeling the water rush into his nose. Panic spiked through his body as he felt the current start to carry him. He kicked his legs and clambered upwards, breaking the surface with a painful gasp of air.

He whipped his head around and saw the bridge he was just standing on getting smaller and smaller, Aki's body still frozen in place.

"Call for help!" Makoto called. "I'm going to look for him!"

Makoto did not wait to see if she had heard him. Instead, he faced the current and flailed against

the water, twisting and turning for any sign of his friend.

"...! Where are you?!" Makoto yelled. "Hey!"

The cold water started to bite into his skin and he knew he had to hurry. He fought against the water, desperately trying not to let the fear grip him, and he pushed forward.

"Hey! Hey….! Where are you?!"

He pushed his arms through the water, calling out and searching frantically for his friend. The water pulled him under again and he quickly held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

'I can't find him, I can't find him!' he thought in a panic, still underneath the water. He raised his arms up to try and get back up to the surface. His eyes fluttered open and strained to see in the water.

'What do I do? What do I—'

Makoto's heart jumped when he saw a dark figure underneath the water. He squinted and saw a dark blue hoodie along with some jeans… and a red scarf in their hand.

'It's him!' Makoto thought.

He dove down under the water and saw that his best friend's foot was pinned in between two rocks. He grabbed his foot and pulled, but nothing budged.

Panic settled inside Makoto's chest. He could feel the burn in his lungs from holding his breath for so long. He had to get his friend out of the water before he drowned.

He got closer to his friend's foot and frantically yanked at the laces of his boot. Once the laces were loose, he slid his foot out of the boot and pulled him free from the rocks. He swam up and scooped his hands underneath his friend's arms and pulled him to the surface.

When they broke the surface, both of them gasped, but his friend was not moving. Makoto could not quite see his face but somehow knew that his friend's eyes were closed.

"Hey! HEY! Can you hear me, ….?" Makoto yelled as they were both pulled down the river.

But his friend still did not move, his blurry face remaining still. He could only hear the wheezy breaths coming from his friend's mouth.

Makoto's brows furrowed. Why was he not waking up?!

"Don't worry, ….! I'll get us out of here! Just hold on!"

Makoto wrapped his arm around his friend's chest and used his other arm to slowly pull them both towards the river's edge. Fortunately, the current had slowed down immensely, allowing Makoto to easily drift them both to the side.

Once they had reached the edge, Makoto's hand latched onto a patch of grass, jolting their bodies to a complete stop. Makoto grunted as he pulled his friend close and then pushed his torso out of the water and onto dry land. Then, Makoto pulled himself out of the water and hurried to pull his friend the rest of the way out.

"Hey… hey!"

Makoto shook his friend's shoulders, begging him to wake up. But his friend did not move an inch, save for his chest's gentle rise and fall with each labored breath. Makoto's hands gripped his friend's shoulders as tears filled his eyes. A sob escaped his mouth and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"No… no, no, no," Makoto whimpered.

He could hear sirens wailing in the distance, each wail getting louder and louder.

"Please, please, wake up!" Makoto begged. "Don't leave me!"

There was a commotion behind him as the sirens got loud and then stopped. He heard doors slamming closed as well as people speaking, but Makoto did not dare look up. He did not let go of his friend and he did not move. Instead, he opened his eyes to look down at his friend's blurry face.

"Please wake up!" Makoto shouted.

"HARU-CHAN!"

Makoto's eyes snapped open to stare up at the living room ceiling. His heart was pounding inside of his heaving chest and he could feel the sweat sliding down his neck. The sweat was cold.

What was that…? Makoto thought as he blinked at the dim ceiling. He shivered as a bead of sweat slid into the collar of his shirt, creating goosebumps in its wake.

Was that a dream?

No. It felt too real.

It was more like… a memory.

Makoto swallowed and he pinched his brows. He had pulled someone out of the river. He felt that the person was his friend. It was a person that he even considered his *best friend*. And… did he call out to him?

"HARU-CHAN!"

Haru…chan?

Wasn't that the nickname Nagisa gives Nanase-san?

Then… was that him in his dream?

Or…

Suddenly, a harsh buzz interrupted his thoughts and he turned his head to see his phone vibrating on the coffee table. He sighed and reached over to grab the phone, answering it without looking at the screen. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth to speak.

"Hello?" Makoto answered groggily. He cleared his throat when he realized how tired he sounded.

"Good morning, Tachibana-san."

Makoto's eyes popped open.

It was Sato.

"O-Oh, good morning, Sato-san!" Makoto greeted in a panic.

He abruptly sat up on the couch and the motion shot a sharp pain through his skull. He hissed and held his head with his free hand, willing the dizziness to stop.

"Sorry. I didn't wake you, did I?" Sato asked.

Makoto's eyes were shut tight to block out the spinning room and he tried to stutter out a response.

"No, no. It's all right," Makoto said softly. He cracked one eye open and sighed in relief when he saw that the coffee table remained stationary. He hunched forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "What can I do for you, Sato-san?"

Sato hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Last night, I was able to go over the information on your new job."

Makoto's free hand fidgeted with the hem of his shorts. He looked over his shoulder towards the hallway to see if Ran and Ren were up, but fortunately, they were both still in their bedrooms. He gulped. He did not want them to hear any of the conversation.

"I-I see," Makoto stuttered. He sat stiffly and cleared his throat. "And… is it... all right?"

"Ah, yes. Your new job is safer with better hours and a much better salary. The agency has approved of your job change so there will be no need for me to make a house visit this week," Sato said.

Makoto released a breath and let his shoulders sag. He smiled a little and allowed the relief to flow through his veins.

"Oh, thank you," Makoto said with a smile.

"Of course. Now then, on to the other topic of discussion," Sato said. Makoto could hear a flutter of papers on the other line and it immediately made him tense up again. "Have you found a larger apartment?"

Makoto's breath lodged in his throat and his back stiffened once again. He gulped and cut his eyes to the couch he was currently sleeping on.

"Um…" Makoto started. His free hand gripped his knee. "Not… not yet."

There was a brief pause and then Sato released a quiet, short sigh.

"I see," Sato said, sounding more disappointed than before. "You need to find an apartment with at least two bedrooms."

"Mmn. I know, Sato-san," Makoto said lowly. He winced slightly at how defeated his voice sounded.

Sato hummed lightly and Makoto could hear more papers fluttering over the line. She took a moment and paused before speaking again.

"Well, Tachibana-san," Sato said. "Really, you should've found a new place when you took your siblings in. Your current apartment was from when you were a college student."

Makoto flinched, his free hand curling into a trembling fist. He knew this. He knew it all too well.

"I know," Makoto said. "But I just… I haven't…"

Makoto bit lip and let his voice trail off, his fingers digging into the fabric of his pants around his knee. His other hand squeezed his phone and he could hear some of the plastic clacking under his grip.

Sato was silent on the other line, the only sound of background noise filling his ear. Then, there was a light sigh.

"Well, since you were just hired at your new job, I'll give you an extension on finding an apartment," Sato said.

Makoto's head whipped up so fast that he heard his neck crack. His hand held the phone in a death grip and he dropped his jaw.

"R-Really?!" Makoto shouted, and then promptly slapped a hand over his mouth. He glanced over his shoulder towards the hallway in mild panic.

"Yes. I will give you two more months to find a new place," Sato said.

Makoto dropped his hand from his mouth and bowed his head in thanks. He felt tears prick at his eyes.

"Thank you, Sato-san," Makoto said in a whisper.

"Well, don't thank me just yet, Tachibana-san," Sato said, and Makoto felt his shoulders tense. "Two months can fly by in the blink of an eye."

Makoto winced at her words and nodded even though Sato could not see.

"Right… well, thank you for the extension, Sato-san," Makoto said.

"You're welcome. I will check in with you again in two months. Have a good day."

"Mmn. You, too."

Makoto hit the End button on his phone and let the device drop down on the coffee table. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair, trying to soothe the ache that was currently plaguing his skull and heart.

Two months… Makoto thought. *Two months to find a new place.*

He lifted up his head to see his laptop sitting on the other side of the coffee table. With a soft groan, Makoto leaned over and snatched it, quickly opening it and clicking on a web browser. He clicked on a few things and then typed in his information.

Then, the website loaded, and Makoto's brow twitched at the glowing computer screen in front of him.

Is… is this really all I have in the bank?

The low number sitting in his account seemed to laugh at him and he quickly scrolled down to view his most recent payments.

There was a check sent to his insurance agency recently, and then other payment sent to the hospital in his hometown. His eyes skimmed past the words *Funeral Home*, not wanting to linger on those payments, and then they landed on the most recent payment from his credit card.

Makoto ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He was thankful that he had bought some food earlier in the week.

Makoto gulped and then moved his cursor to click on the other tab in the corner, opening up a second webpage. He typed in a few more words and clicked on the results. He scrolled down the page and viewed all of the listings for available two-bedroom apartments in the area. His shoulders slumped when he reached the end of the page.

The salary at Nanase's restaurant was more than enough for one person alone, but for someone supporting two other people on top of bills… bills that included heavy medical bills…

Makoto reached up and rubbed the back of his head, his fingers tracing the scar. The headache was painful this morning. His doctors had warned him about using computers and watching television but he did not think that his headaches would actually grow *worse*.

He rubbed his eyes to block out the light for a moment and then focused back on the screen with squinting eyes. He moved the cursor up to click open a new tab.

He should look for a new job, right? Or, a second job, at least.

Right?

His cursor paused at the tab and his finger hesitated to press down.

But…

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"You could work here. There's an opening for stockroom manager."

"It's not too late."

"You can always just thank her now. She probably knows how thankful you are for it, anyway."

"There are some meals in there, a little variety of the specials we served today."

"I'm giving it to you. Take it. Consider it a gift."

Nanase had already done so much for him. It was more than Makoto could ever hope to repay him for, but with this job, Makoto could at least help him out in some small capacity.

Nanase has shown me so much kindness. I can't just quit on him now.

With a small sigh, Makoto shut his laptop with a soft click and he ran his hand over his face. He had to figure out something soon or else the twins would be—

"Onii-chaaaan!"

Makoto flinched violently, knocking his foot into the leg of the coffee table. He grunted in pain and leaned over to hold his foot.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow…" Makoto whimpered. He turned his head to see Ran standing right behind

him, still in her pajamas. He gave her a pained smile. "G-Good morning, Ran."

"Morning, Onii-chan!" Ran greeted, her voice ringing in Makoto's ears. It made him wince slightly. "You're taking us to the park this weekend, right?"

Makoto blinked at her, wracking his throbbing brain. Had he made a promise to her like that recently?

"Um…" he mumbled.

"You said that since you don't work on weekends, you would take us to the park!" Ran said.

Makoto tried to control the grimace that threatened to take over his face.

I'm not sure if it will stay that way, but…

"You're right, I did say that," Makoto said with a small smile. "I'll take you guys on Saturday."

Ran smiled brightly and jumped in the air. "Yes, yes, yes! I want to play soccer!"

Makoto chuckled softly and nodded. "Okay, that's fine. Is Ren awake, yet?"

Ran's face fell slightly and she nodded quietly. She threw her thumb over her shoulder, gesturing towards the bathroom.

"Yeah. He's in the bathroom," she said, her brows pinching.

Makoto blinked at her sudden change in attitude. He tried for a smile.

"O-Okay, well… why don't you go get ready, then?" Makoto asked.

Ran huffed out a sigh, her demeanor suddenly completely different, and then stomped off towards her room.

Makoto wanted to pull his hair out. What was going on in that girl's mind?! He sighed and ran his hands through his hair one last time. He would have to talk to her once school was done today.

With a slight groan, Makoto pushed himself up from the couch, feeling his back drenched with cold sweat. He shivered at the feeling and debated whether or not he would have time for a shower. He would have to hurry if he wanted to make it on time to work. Nanase would be unhappy if—

"HARU-CHAN!"

Makoto shuddered, remembering the feeling of the cold water crushing his body and violently pushing him downstream. It had felt so incredibly real but… it was just a dream. It had to have been.

Right?

Then, Makoto heard a door click shut and he turned his head to see Ren coming out of the bathroom, yawning. Ran was shouting something down from the bedroom and Ren mumbled out a response.

Makoto sighed. He had no time to worry about this. He had to pack lunches and get the twins ready for school.

Time to get to work to help out Nanase.

When Makoto walked into work that morning, the restaurant was fuller than usual. The entire wait staff, along with all of the chefs, was already there. They were all heading towards the kitchen, and Makoto cocked his head. What was the hurry this morning? Did he miss a notice on a meeting?

"Oi, out of the way."

Makoto jolted at the gravelly voice that snarled from behind, the noise making the hairs on his neck stand on their ends. He squeaked and jumped out of the way to see a waiter glaring at him as he passed by. Makoto studied his back as he walked towards the kitchen.

He seems familiar. Where have I seen him before? Makoto thought.

Then, it clicked.

"OI! Hazuki, Ryugazaki! I've finally found you two! You didn't request to be on break!"

"Oops, we got caught. Bye, Mako-chan!"

Ah. So it was the grumpy waiter from before. Now that he thought about it, was he the *head* waiter?

Makoto decided to file those thoughts away for later as he hurried back to the kitchen. He pushed the door open slowly and quietly, faintly hearing a voice speaking.

"He will be here tomorrow in the mid-afternoon, so I will need everyone here and ready to prepare any dish he requests."

Makoto's heart skipped a beat at the sound. He stepped into the kitchen, allowing the door to softly swing shut behind him. He peeked around the corner to see Nanase addressing the chefs. The chefs looked displease, bickering about certain dishes. But Nanase answered their questions and disputes with ease.

Makoto watched as Nanase handled the situation in a calm fashion, dousing the anger with his cool words. It was incredible to watch.

However, Makoto noticed the slight crease in Nanase's brows.

"He seems stressed."

"I think you're right, Nagisa-kun."

Makoto turned his head to see Rei and Nagisa standing together against the wall, both with creased brows and intense looks. Nagisa looked more determined with his hands curled into fists. It looked as if he was in a fighting stance.

Makoto cast a glance over to Nanase before heading over to Nagisa and Rei near the wall. When he reached them, he greeted them with a small wave.

"Oh! Hey, Mako-chan!" Nagisa greeted in a loud whisper.

"Not so loud, Nagisa-kun," Rei warned. His glasses slipped down his nose a bit and he reached up to adjust them. "Haruka-san is still speaking. Don't distract him."

Makoto glanced between the two of them and furrowed his brows.

"What's going on today? Why are there so many workers here this early?" Makoto asked.

"Oh, you didn't hear?" Nagisa asked.

When Makoto shook his head in response, Nagisa and Rei exchanged looks. Rei leaned back against the wall and looked at Nanase with upturned eyebrows.

"Well, you see, Haruka-san received a call about a food critic wanting to come in to review our restaurant," Rei said.

Makoto's eyes widened a bit. "A food critic?"

"Mmn!" Nagisa hummed with an excited nod. "And this food critic isn't very friendly at all!"

"He's not?" Makoto asked.

"He's not very forgiving," Rei said. "He's been known to ruin restaurants with just one review."

Makoto paled, suddenly feeling nauseous. He glanced back at Nanase, who was still giving instructions to the chefs. Worry settled into his stomach.

"That's terrible…" Makoto said to no one in particular. The situation just seemed very stressful and overwhelming. He wondered if there was anything he could do to help.

"Yeah, you're right. He even pulled some strings and got a reservation for tomorrow afternoon," Nagisa said.

Makoto whirled around with wide eyes. "H-He's coming *tomorrow*?"

"Unfortunately," Rei said. "It's strange that he was able to get a reservation at such a short notice. You usually have to reserve a table a month in advance."

Nagisa lifted up a finger, his eyes sparkling.

"I heard he called the companies who had reservations for tomorrow and personally requested them to reschedule!" Nagisa said cheekily.

"Now that's just being presumptuous," Rei said.

"How do you know, Rei-chan? Maybe he's a spy, too!" Nagisa said, standing on his tiptoes to lean closer.

Rei sighed and looked away while shaking his head. "You really need to do your homework instead of watching so many shows late at night."

Nagisa puffed out his cheeks and pouted at him before leaning forward to nuzzle his forehead against Rei's arm.

"You know homework is boring, Rei-chan! I can't concentrate without you there to force me to do it," Nagisa mumbled.

"That's not a valid reason! Do your homework by yourself!"

"Stingy!"

Makoto's mind drifted as they started to bicker, his thoughts focused on the impending doom that was this mysterious food critic. If they receive a bad review, would Nanase's restaurant have to close?

All of the hard work that Nanase had put into graduating early and then starting a business in a new city by himself.

All of the hospitality that Nanase had shown him…

And…

If the restaurant went out of business, so did his chances of being able to save up for a new apartment. And then…

"I do hope you are aware of the consequences if these standards aren't met. Right, Tachibana-san?"

Makoto shuddered at the thought and shook his head, putting a determined look on his face. He would do whatever was necessary to help Nanase keep his restaurant alive.

"Are we going to get paid extra for this?"

An angry, familiar voice spoke up and it silenced the thoughts swarming around in Makoto's head. He glanced over to see that same waiter from before, his arms folded across his chest and his face pulled into a scowl. Makoto flinched slightly at the man's tone and glanced to the front of the room at Nanase.

Nanase blinked at him and Makoto could see his brow twitch in what looked like annoyance.

"Why would you get paid extra? You're just doing your jobs," Nanase said bluntly. "Just because a food critic is coming it does not mean you're doing anything differently. You're just doing things as you normally would."

The waiter's eyes widened slightly at Nanase's tone, and Makoto shrunk in on himself. He hoped that things would not get heated.

Luckily, the man remained quiet, grumbling angrily to himself as he averted his eyes. His hands were clenched into fists, making his knuckles turn white.

Makoto paled again.

This man was terrifying.

"Any other questions?" Nanase asked a little harshly. Makoto could tell that he was a little bothered by it all. It would definitely be something that would frazzle Makoto and he was in awe that Nanase was handling everything so well.

When the room remained silent, Nanase nodded and placed his hands on his hips.

"Good. We need this place in good shape for tomorrow, so clean up where you can. Go ahead and go to your stations. You're dismissed."

There was a collective sigh amongst the workers in the room as they all dispersed. The waiter from before stormed past the other workers, knocking shoulders with Makoto as he walked by. Makoto squeaked and butted up against the wall with a strained smile on his face.

"S-Sorry!" Makoto said, his voice cracking.

The waiter only threw a glare in his direction as he left, making Makoto want to melt into the wall.

Scary!

"Aw, looks like he's is at it again," Nagisa chirped, suddenly by Makoto's side. He patted Makoto's arm and smiled brightly. "Don't mind him, Mako-chan! He's always been like this."

Makoto blinked and gulped. "He's always been this angry?"

"Well, he's usually just ill-tempered. His fuse is very short," Rei explained. He stroked his chin. "But he does seem more agitated than usual."

Makoto sighed, closing his eyes as he reached up to rub his aching head. All this stress was starting to get to him. He was unsure of any way he could help Nanase, but he wanted to do *something*.

But what could he possibly do?

A familiar feeling of helplessness clenched his heart inside his chest. He took a slow, deep breath as he tried to form some sort of strategy on how to help keep this restaurant afloat.

"Are you okay?"

Makoto's head snapped up and he opened his eyes to meet a pair of blue ones. His breath seized in his chest at the worried look on Nanase's face.

And suddenly—

"HARU-CHAN!"

Makoto's chest jumped as he gasped softly. His heart panged uncomfortably as he stared at Nanase.

Was his dream last night really about Nanase?

"Eh? What's wrong, Mako-chan?"

"Tachibana-san?"

Makoto snapped out of his daze as he was met with two more pairs of worried eyes. Makoto blinked back into reality and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Ah, yeah. Sorry. I'm okay," Makoto said to Rei and Nagisa, offering them a reassuring smile.

Nagisa and Rei exchanged another glace before shrugging and heading out to their stations, leaving Nanase and Makoto alone in that area of the kitchen.

Makoto glanced up at Nanase and stared at him worriedly.

"Um… Nagisa and Rei filled me in on what's going on tomorrow," Makoto said. "Is there… any way I can help?"

Nanase blinked at him, his lips twisting to the side. He gave the kitchen a glance over before shrugging.

"Not really. Just do what you normally do," Nanase said.

Makoto winced a little, not settled with that in the slightest. But he did not want to add any pressure to his day.

So instead, Makoto gave him a smile.

"Well, just let me know if there is anything I can do," Makoto said. "I know I just started and that I don't have many skills, but… if there's anything that I can help with, please let me know."

"There's really nothing," Nanase said. "Just treat it like a normal day."

Makoto paused, feeling his heart throb painfully inside of his chest. He glanced down at his feet and frowned, his fingers nervously twisting.

"It's just… you've done so much for me and I don't know how I could ever repay you. You've really saved me," Makoto said with a small smile.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt the tips of his ears tingle with a light blush. He glanced up to see Nanase staring at him with wide eyes and Makoto's face burned.

"W-Well, I mean… you know, I was just in need of a job and, well, yeah, um…"

Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, feeling completely flushed as he tried to come up with an explanation for his big mouth. Where in the world did that even come from? Why was it so easy to talk to Nanase?

Nanase hesitated and then reached up to rub his shoulder, casting his eyes over to the other side of the kitchen towards the pantry doors.

"Just make sure we've got all the ingredients needed for tomorrow. And maybe help Rei put those new menus together," Nanase said.

Makoto's eyes sparkled as his chest swelled. He felt pride that he could ease even one of Nanase's burdens. He smiled and gave a slight bow.

"I will do that right away!" Makoto said.

He heard Nanase huff and he peeked up at him.

Makoto's eyes widened.

Was Nanase… smiling?

"Did you just… laugh?" Makoto asked, straightening his back.

"No," Nanase said quickly, his face back to his neutral scowl.

"Are you sure? Because it looked like—"

"Oi, don't you have a job to do?"

Makoto smiled and chuckled. "Yes, *boss*."

Nanase scowled but Makoto knew he meant nothing by it. He simply threw a smirk at Nanase and got right to work at the pantries.

Time to get to work!

"Eh? A food critic?"

"Today?"

Makoto glanced down at his siblings as he walked with them on the sidewalk. He smiled at them, though his chest was tight with nerves. Even though the critic was not scheduled to show up until at the very end of his shift, he still felt his stomach flutter at the day ahead of him. He had to do everything he possibly could to keep this restaurant from going under.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed. "It's a pretty big deal. I have to make sure Nanase-san's restaurant gets a good review."

"I want to meet Nanase-san!" Ran said with a smile.

"Me, too," Ren spoke up.

Makoto chuckled lightly and nodded. "I'll have to see if I can introduce you to him one day."

"I'd prefer sooner rather than later," Ran muttered.

"We will have to see," Makoto said. "Nanase is a busy man."

They stepped up to the front gate of the school and Makoto waved them off with a smile.

"I'll be here to pick you up after your clubs," Makoto said.

"Bye, Onii-chan!" Ran called.

"G-Good luck at work," Ren said back to him.

Makoto smiled and nodded, watching them until they both disappeared behind the double doors of the school.

He turned around and took a deep breath to calm his pounding heart. Besides unloading the truck, he had only a few things to do this morning. But that did not mean he could not help out when he was done.

"All right," Makoto said as he took a step towards the restaurant. "Time to get to work."

He walked the one block to the restaurant and stepped inside. Truck days were normally empty except for himself and Nanase, but on this particular morning, there were several extra bodies rushing around the restaurant. One person was wiping down the windows and getting rid of the smudges while another worker was mopping the floor.

Makoto carefully stepped over the wet areas of the floor and hurried to the back room to unload the truck. Nanase was already in the kitchen with a few of his chefs, the sweet aroma of food filling Makoto's senses and making him smile.

Nanase's recipes were truly incredible.

He wanted to greet Nanase before he got to work on the truck but decided against it when he saw how busy he looked. Instead, Makoto hurried to the truck and began to unload.

I'll do what I can, Nanase-san! Makoto thought. *I'll do what I can to help you like you've helped me!*

"Order for table 20!"

"Oi, go clear those tables. The reservations for those spots will be here any minute!"

"Are those plates cleaned, yet? We need them for the next dishes!"

While it was the end of Makoto's shift, the lunch rush was at its peak, with orders coming in left and right. The kitchen was a well-oiled machine, all of the chefs and busboys working together to get everything cleaned and plated in an orderly fashion. It might have been chaos, but it was at least controlled chaos.

Makoto grabbed his jacket from the hook on the wall and was about to pull it on when one of the hosts came into the kitchen and hollered out to the staff.

"Table 17 needs to be cleared *now!"* someone shouted.

Makoto paused with his jacket in his hand to see someone studying the chart for the tables in the restaurant. He squinted his eyes to see that table 17 was near the center of the room, while the larger numbers surrounded the outsides.

What was so special about table 17 today?

"It's almost done!" a busboy said on his way in, his arms full of plates.

"Good, good. The food critic will be here any minute," someone else said.

Makoto blinked, almost forgetting about the food critic completely. It had been such a busy day of him organizing the pantries, freezers, and menus that he had forgotten why everything had to be in top shape in the first place.

"Oh, hey, Mako-chan! All done with your shift?"

Makoto glanced down to see Nagisa coming into the kitchen with a bright smile on his face. Makoto smiled back and nodded.

"Yeah, I've got to pick up by siblings from school," Makoto said.

"Oh, I see, I see," Nagisa said. "Thanks for all your help today! You really helped Rei-chan."

Makoto's smile widened and he rubbed the back of his neck, looking shyly at the ground. He could hear the door to the kitchen opening and shutting as he spoke.

"Well, all I did was help replace the menus," Makoto said. "I was just glad I was able to—"

"This is ridiculous! How do you expect me to work all of these tables by myself?!"

Makoto's head snapped up to see that same grumpy waiter from before shouting at Nanase. Nanase was holding his ground, however, not flinching in the slightest.

"This is no different than any other Friday night," Nanase said. "You've done fine before."

"That's because you never pay attention to your workers! And on top of all this, you give *me* the food critic?!" the waiter screamed. "Do you know how much added pressure is on me because of this? Why didn't you ask an extra waiter to come in for today?"

Nanase's brows lowered in agitation. "It's just one extra person, not an entire table. You should be able to handle it."

The waiter waved his arms around. "Are you kidding me? Just *one extra person*? This *one extra person* could decide the fate of the entire restaurant and you want to put that pressure on me?!"

The entire kitchen was now listening in to the outburst, all seemingly frozen in time. Makoto, with his jacket still in his hand, was also frozen, watching this conversation spiral out of control.

"I put you up to the task because you're the head waiter. You have the most experience," Nanase said.

"But that doesn't mean I should have to do this by myself," the waiter fumed.

"Um, Haruka-san," a voice called from the door.

All eyes turned to see Rei entering the kitchen with a pale face.

"What is it, Rei?" Nanase asked.

"Um…" Rei lifted a shaking hand to adjust his glasses. "The food critic is here and is at table 17."

The kitchen was completely silent, wide eyes all staring at Rei. The chefs soon stared down at their dishes as if they were foreign and the busboys fiddled with their aprons.

Nanase closed his eyes for a moment before looking back up at Rei with the same levelheaded coolness he had shown all day.

"How long has he been here?" Nanase asked.

Rei fidgeted with the menus in his grasp. "Almost ten minutes."

Nanase turned his eyes back to the indignant waiter in front of him.

"Have you gone out to take his order, yet?" Nanase asked.

The waiter practically growled.

"Of course not! I just told you that I refuse to do this by myself!" the waiter said.

Nanase clicked his tongue and sighed, and Makoto's eyes widened. Ten whole minutes without any kind of interaction from a waiter? That was way too long. At this rate, the critic could leave.

"You don't have a choice here," Nanase seethed.

"Are you kidding me?!" the waiter shouted.

"You need to go out there and take his order," Nanase said.

The waiter let out a long, frustrated growl and reached behind himself to untie his black pouch apron. He flung it to the ground, a few pens falling out of the pockets along with an order notepad.

"That's it!" he shouted. "I'm out of here!"

With those parting words, the waiter stormed out of the kitchen, flinging the swinging door open and stomping out.

It was deadly silent in the kitchen, and for a moment, no one even dared to breathe. There was a beat, and then Nagisa's voice broke the silence.

"W-What do we do now?" Nagisa asked, his voice uncharacteristically small.

Makoto watched as several emotions flashed across Nanase's face, every one causing his chest to squeeze. Soon enough, Nanase turned his head to gaze at the kitchen staff.

"Don't just stand there. Continue making your dishes," Nanase commanded.

The chefs jumped back into action, the sounds of sizzling and mixing once again ringing in the air.

Nanase turned back to look at Nagisa and Rei, who were both staring at him with concerned eyes. Nanase's face scrunched up slightly at their pitiful looks.

"Don't look at me like that. It's not the end of the world," Nanase said. "I'll just have to take his order myself."

"Eh?! But, Haru-chan, don't you have your own dishes you have to make?" Nagisa asked.

"And aren't you the only one who knows how to make some of the specials?" Rei asked.

Nanase paused and then glanced down at the floor with creased brows. The sight made Makoto wince. This was starting to sound more and more troublesome than he imagined.

"Then what are we going to do?" Nagisa asked. "I already have too many tables!"

"I can't leave the hosting station for too long," Rei said. "I'm only here to let you know that the food critic was waiting!"

"Well, *someone* has to do it!"

"And who are you suggesting do it, then?!"

Makoto watched as Nanase's face twisted into something dark, his gaze lowering to the floor. He looked sad, a look far from the smile he had shown just the other day.

Makoto's hands clenched into fists.

"You could work here. There's an opening for stockroom manager."

Nanase was the one who got him the job.

"You can always just thank her now. She probably knows how thankful you are for it, anyway."

Nanase was the one to point him onto the path towards forgiveness.

"Are you okay?"

"Are you okay?"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

Nanase… was the one who cared when no one else did.

Makoto did not even think twice.

...grabbed the bars of the bridge...

He put down his jacket and took a step forward, barely registering the conversation happening in front of him.

...hoisted himself up and flung himself over the edge...

"But we *have* to find someone!" Rei said.

"Should we call in another waiter?" Nagisa asked.

"We don't have time," Nanase said. "Someone has to go out there now and—"

Makoto plunged into the river.

Makoto scooped up the pouch apron, quickly tying it around his waist and grabbing the ordering notepad and a stray pen. He hurried to the kitchen door and started to push it open.

"Tachibana-san?!"

"O-Oi, what are you doing?"

"Mako-chan, where are you—"

Makoto swallowed thickly and headed out to into the restaurant. The tables were all full and the floor was bustling about with waiters and busboys all catering to their designated tables.

Makoto scanned the tables nervously until his eyes landed on a table in the middle of the room. A man filled only one seat and he held a notepad in his hand. He also had a pin on the collar of his shirt along with a folder next to his empty glass.

Makoto gulped. That had to have been him.

He took a slow deep breath.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep your restaurant going, Makoto thought, repeating his earlier promise.

With a new sense of determination, Makoto walked as confidently as he could over to the table. When the food critic glanced up and made eye contact, Makoto put on a bright smile and tilted his head.

I'm so nervous I could puke.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Makoto said, trying to keep his voice from quivering. "My name is Tachibana. How may I help you today?"

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

You felt it so strong

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely feedback on the previous chapter!! You guys are amazing.
HUGE shoutout to my amazing friend, Tayu-chan, who helped me put this enormous chapter together. You are a wonderful human being!

Also, my lovely friend velvloid has done some amazing fanart for this fanfic!
Check them out here and here!

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'll just have to take his order myself."

Haru glanced down at the waiter's apron on the floor in front of him, the order notepad and pens scattered by their feet. He took a slow breath, ready to lean down to take the notepad in his hand. The last thing he wanted to do was to interact with this arrogant food critic, but they could not just sit around doing nothing. Even if Haru had to go out there himself, then he would.

"Eh?! But, Haru-chan, don't you have your own dishes you have to make?" Nagisa asked.

Haru froze, his eyes locked onto the black apron.

"And aren't you the only one who knows how to make some of the specials?" Rei added.

Haru winced and lowered his head. They were absolutely right. There was no way he could go out there and take over the few tables the head waiter had abandoned along with the food critic's table.

"Then what are we going to do?" Nagisa asked. "I already have too many tables!"

Oh, right. Nagisa had his own tables to take care of.

But now there were at least two other tables without any waiters assigned to them along with the food critic who had not seen any waiter approach him for the past ten minutes.

"I can't leave the hosting station for too long," Rei said. "I'm only here to let you know that the food critic was waiting!"

Not only that, but Rei was not exactly trained to be a waiter. He had an analytical mind, which made him the perfect host. He was excellent at matching waiters to particular guests, knowing that the personalities would be compatible and earning high reviews from the masses.

But the stress of the waiting tables would be too much for Rei's mind. Haru knew this all too well.

Haru put his hand to his mouth, his front teeth nibbling on his thumbnail. Panic started to bloom in his chest and then spread to his arms and legs. They had to act quickly and efficiently to get whatever the food critic needed.

But what could they do?

"But we *have* to find someone!" Rei said, his voice cracking slightly.

"Should we call in another waiter?" Nagisa asked.

Haru sighed and lifted his head to gaze at the two of them. They both looked beyond stressed about the situation.

How annoying.

"We don't have time," Haru said. He sighed, his patience finally starting to run out. "Someone has to go out there now and—"

Suddenly, there was movement in front of Haru's eyes.

A white button-up shirt fitted across broad shoulders.

A mess of brown hair.

It was Tachibana.

"Tachibana-san?!"

Rei's voice snapped Haru out of his daze and he blinked rapidly to see Tachibana bending down to grab the apron and the notepad. He quickly tied the apron around his waist and he snatched up the notepad along with a pen.

Wait a minute. What was he doing?

He… he was not planning on going out there, was he?!

"O-Oi, what are you doing?" Haru demanded, a knot raveling and unraveling inside his chest.

Instead of answering him, the stubborn fool walked to the door. Haru reached out, ready to grab him, but his hand froze when he saw the look in Tachibana's eye.

It was intense. Personal. Determined.

Haru's hand stayed hovered in the air as he watched Tachibana disappear from the kitchen.

"Mako-chan, where are you—" Nagisa tried calling out, but it was too late.

The three of them hesitated in the bustling kitchen with wide eyes and dropped jaws. There was a moment of silence before the realization all came crashing down in a heap.

"Eh?!" Nagisa shrieked, his hands flying up to his hair.

"W-What is he doing?! Is he insane?!" Rei practically yelled as he almost dropped the menus in his arms.

Haru took in a deep breath and rushed to the door of the kitchen. He cracked it open just enough for his head to poke through and he immediately could pick out the giant klutz amongst the chaotic restaurant floor.

And he was standing in front of the food critic.

"He's really taking his order!"

Haru glanced down to see Nagisa's head poking out of the doorway underneath of him, his eyes sparkling in amazement.

"This is truly concerning. His form isn't elegant or beautiful in the slightest!"

Haru jumped at the voice echoing from above and he glanced up to see Rei poking his head out as well.

"Aw, have some faith, Rei-chan! What's the worst that could happen?" Nagisa asked from down below.

"He could totally turn off the food critic," Rei said.

"Quiet," Haru snapped, tilting his head to listen.

He strained his ears and tried to focus on the table in the center of the room. He could barely hear past the other guests but he managed to hear that familiar, baritone voice of the food critic.

"Oh? So someone has finally decided to show up," the food critic said with a crooked smile.

Tachibana bowed his head, the action making Haru's brow twitch. The selfish part of him hated that someone like Tachibana had to bow to a man like that.

"Th-There was a mix-up and we are terribly sorry for the inconvenience," Tachibana apologized with a slight stutter.

Haru winced at the sound of his voice. He was obviously nervous.

Stay calm, stay calm, Haru prayed.

"A mix-up?" the critic said with a quirked brow. He stroked his chin and gave a light sigh. "Well, I suppose there's no helping it. I *am* here to try out the food, anyway, right?"

The food critic gave a wide smile and started to ramble off some appetizers while Tachibana's shaking hands jotted down the orders on notepad. Once he was done, Tachibana bowed deeply to the food critic and whirled around to head to the kitchen.

"Oh, he's coming, he's coming!" Nagisa chirped.

The three of them ducked back into the kitchen and backed away from the door. They watched as Tachibana entered the kitchen with a tight-lipped smile and a strange look in his eyes. He hesitated, staring down at the pen and order notepad in his hands.

Then, his smile fell, and Haru could see the moment that reality smacked him in the face.

"Wha…" Tachibana started, his eyes widening. Then, he dropped the order pad and pen and reached up to grab at his hair. "What the heck did I just do?!"

Haru snapped out of his daze and walked towards him putting up his hands to try and calm his frazzled employee.

"Just relax," Haru said. "You did fine. You got his order, right?"

Tachibana blinked down at him for a moment and then nodded, his arms slowly coming back

down to his sides. He fidgeted with the sides of his pants as he clenched them in his fists.

"H-He wanted to order a few appetizers to try out a-and he asked for some red wine," Tachibana explained softly.

Haru knelt down to pick up the order pad and then stood back up. He put his hand to his chin and nodded as he read over the jittery words on the notepad.

"Got it," Haru said.

He turned back to the kitchen and hollered out the several orders of appetizers to the kitchen. A few of them shouted in confirmation and then Haru turned to look back at Tachibana.

"Okay. When the orders come out, you can go and deliver them," Haru said, handing Tachibana the notepad.

Tachibana hesitantly took the notepad back from him with a confused stare. Once it clicked, Tachibana's brows shot up and he gasped.

"A-Ah, wait! I-I can't stay here! I've got to go and pick up my siblings from school. Their clubs… they should be done in a few minutes," Tachibana said, his brows upturned in stress.

Haru blinked at him and gave him a hard stare.

"You can't leave now. The critic has already seen your face," Haru said. "*You* are the one he's expecting now, so *you* have to be the one to take care of him."

"Eh?!" Tachibana squeaked. "B-But… my siblings, they… I can't just leave them there by themselves."

Haru blinked at him, watching as the poor guy's shoulders drooped and his eyes glistened. He visibly gulped and looked on the verge of tears. Haru's lips twisted and he reached up to rub the back of his neck.

This is too much effort, Haru thought. He hoped he would not regret this.

"What school do they go to?" Haru asked, averting his eyes for a moment.

Tachibana's head snapped up from staring at the ground, his eyes wide and brows crawling up his forehead. He opened and shut his mouth a few times before pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

"Th-They go to the middle school one block away," Tachibana answered.

Haru thought for a minute and then nodded.

"Okay. I'll go and get them," Haru decided.

Tachibana's jaw dropped and he stared at Haru with wide eyes.

"W-What?!" Tachibana squeaked.

Haru ignored his cry and turned to Nagisa.

"Nagisa, you're going to have to take on one of the tables left behind," Haru said, looking to the small blond standing by the doorway to the kitchen. Nagisa perked up at the mention of his name. "Can you handle that?"

Nagisa hesitated for only a split second before raising his hand to his brow in a salute.

"I'll take table 14!" Nagisa announced.

Haru nodded in thanks and watched him hurry out of the kitchen to tend to his new table. He then looked at Rei.

"Rei, see if you can ask Mizuki to take on the other two tables left behind," Haru commanded.

Rei adjusted his glasses and gave a sharp look.

"Understood," Rei said, and he also fled from the kitchen with determination in his gait.

Finally, Haru turned back to Tachibana, seeing the poor guy trembling in his place. Haru noticed the wrinkles at the edges of his shirt as well as the crooked collar and missing button. Unloading the truck that morning had done a number to his look.

Then, it hit him.

Tachibana was not wearing the typical waiter's uniform.

Haru acted fast, quickly moving to the closet in the back and rummaging through the shelves.

"What time did you say your siblings were done with school?" Haru called as he grabbed a black vest and tie.

"U-Uh…" Tachibana stuttered, and Haru knew that he was probably studying his watch. "Um… maybe ten minutes?"

"Mmn. Plenty of time," Haru said.

He came back with the clothing in hand and passed it to Tachibana, who wordlessly took it and stared at it.

"This is the waiter's vest and tie. Put them on," Haru said.

Tachibana jolted out of his daze and scrambled to put the tie around his neck. He fumbled with the tie a few times before tying it into a sloppy knot and fitting it around the collar of his shirt. Afterwards, he quickly shrugged on the black vest and make quick work of the elegant buttons on the front.

Once he was done, Haru smoothed out some of the crinkles in the fabric and tugged on the vest to make sure it was in the correct place. He pulled on the knot of the tie and felt his brow twitch.

This boy was a mess.

"There," Haru decided, taking a minute to step back and study his handiwork. "That looks better. Now then, I'll go and get your siblings."

Haru turned towards the doorway of the kitchen, ready to walk the one block down to the middle school, when Tachibana put up his hands to stop him.

"W-Wait! How will they know to look for you? They don't know that you're picking them up," Tachibana said, looking at Haru with concerned eyes.

Haru bit his lip and tilted his head. Tachibana had a good point. How could he get these two

middle school students to approach him if he does not even know their names?

And now that he thought about it, Haru did not exactly remember what they looked like, either.

Haru glanced around the kitchen, his mind reeling, until his eyes landed on a chalkboard display tucked in the corner. His eyes brightened as he leaned down to pick it up along with a stray piece of chalk.

"Here, write your siblings' names on here," Haru said, handing him the display and chalk.

"On your chalkboard display?!"

"Yes," Haru said bluntly.

Tachibana gulped and then quickly started to write out the symbols for his siblings' names. Haru internally cringed. The way Tachibana held the chalk was just so… wrong.

Haru shook his head to fling the thoughts away from him. He would have to teach him how to properly hold it later.

"H-Here," Tachibana stuttered, handing back the display.

Haru took the display and stared down at the handwriting, reading out the symbols for his last name along with two names.

Ran and Ren.

Haru's lips twisted. He would have remembered if his friend had siblings growing up…

Right?

"Got it," Haru said. He adjusted the buttons on his chef's uniform and once again headed for the door to the kitchen. "I'll be back."

"WAIT!"

Suddenly, there was a hand gripping Haru's wrist, and Haru whirled around to see Tachibana gazing at him with a pleading look on his face. His hand shook around Haru's wrist and his jaw quivered slightly.

Haru was annoyed at first, but when he locked his eyes with Tachibana's, he froze.

Tachibana's green eyes were completely filled with terror.

"Please…" Tachibana said in a whisper. "You *have* to walk with them across the street. Don't let them cross by themselves."

Tachibana lowered his head and Haru heard his breath hitch slightly as he tightened his grip around his wrist.

"*Please*," Tachibana begged. He gazed back up at Haru with some tears in his eyes. "Please watch out for them."

Haru's lips parted in awe as he stared down at his employee. If he was a mess before, he was a complete wreck now. He thought of all of the times that he had crossed paths with Tachibana. Every time they met, he was on the verge of tears. But even those times, Tachibana tried to wear a

smile.

But Tachibana was standing here with the most pitiful look on his face, and no smile in sight.

"I'll watch them," Haru said finally.

Tachibana inhaled sharply and his eyes widened. Haru felt his heart squeeze. Why did he look so shocked? Why was he so afraid?

Haru put his hand on top of Tachibana's, gently prying off his fingers from their death grip on his wrist. Tachibana's eyes widened as his hand fell limp to his side. He seemed extremely timid and unsure, eyeing Haru with a look of hopelessness.

Finally, Tachibana conceded and nodded, looking like a lost puppy. Haru bit his lip.

Tell me what you're so afraid of. What on earth happened to you? Haru thought.

He reached over and grabbed onto Tachibana's shoulder and gave him one small shake.

"Hey, don't worry, okay? I'll get them here safely," Haru said. "I promise."

Tachibana nodded right away this time and Haru sighed a little in relief.

He's calmed down now. Good.

"The food critic's orders should be ready soon. When they're done, they'll call out his table number. You just have to take it to him. Can you handle that?" Haru asked.

Tachibana took a deep breath and nodded, his hands curling into fists by his sides.

"Good. Now, I'll go and get your siblings," Haru said, and he brushed past Tachibana and left the kitchen with the chalkboard display in his hand.

He passed the food critic's table, who stared at him with sly eyes and a crooked smile. Haru pointedly ignored him and walked to the front, where he was met with Rei's confused eyes.

"Haruka-san? What's going on? Where's Tachibana?"

"Tachibana is waiting the critic's table," Haru said.

"Huh?! You really think he can do that? He hasn't been trained to be a waiter!" Rei said, obviously in distress.

Haru looked at Rei with sharp eyes and nodded once. "He'll be fine." He walked to the front door, feeling a tiny twist of nervousness swirling in his gut. "Keep an eye on him," Haru called over his shoulder as he pushed open the front door. "I'll be back soon!"

"W-Wait!"

Ignoring Rei's cries, Haru walked down the sidewalk with the display in his hand and his eyes forward. His brows pushed together, creating worry lines on his forehead.

He… He should be fine.

I hope.

Nanase's back had disappeared beyond the kitchen doors, and all of a sudden, Makoto was by himself.

Makoto's heart was pounding so hard against his chest that he thought his ribs would break.

W-Wait. What am I supposed to do?!

Did I just agree to be the waiter for the food critic?!

H-How do I—

"Order for Table 17!"

Makoto snapped out of his panic at the sound of one of the chefs calling out an order. The table number sounded familiar. Why did that sound familiar again?

Table 17…

Oh right!

That was the food critic's table!

But how did they make that order so quickly?

Makoto scrambled to pick up one of the trays and he walked over to grab the appetizers off of the pick-up counter. He gulped as he tried to balance the tray over his shoulder, hoping that his big, clumsy body would not be his downfall tonight.

He made it through the kitchen door and then proceeded directly to the food critic's table.

Don't trip, don't trip…

With a few close-calls with other waiters, Makoto managed to make it to the table in one piece.

"And how nice of you to dress properly for your job," the food critic commented with a smirk as he eyed Makoto's vest and tie.

Makoto flushed all the way down his neck and up to the tips of his ears. He managed to keep a wobbling smile on his face and his hands shifted with the tray.

"Y-Yes, I, uh… I had to change earlier," Makoto admitted sheepishly.

The food critic scoffed, his hand spinning the pen in between his fingers.

Makoto gulped and then fumbled with the tray as he lowered it off his shoulder, almost dropping it in the process, but his fast reflexes saved the tray before it went crashing to the ground. He sheepishly set the tray down and placed the dishes on the table.

"My, my, that could've been disastrous. I'd like to order more food, but if you're going to make me *wear* it instead, then I might as well should leave," the critic commented.

Makoto bowed his head shamefully. "My apologies. It won't happen again."

The food critic looked over him with a critical expression. "Is this your first night on the job?"

Makoto gulped and forced his lips to smile wide across his face. It felt so fake and strained that he

wanted to cry.

"Yes, sir," Makoto answered honestly.

The food critic's sly expression vanished from sight, a curious look replacing it.

"I see," he said, one hand reaching for his glass of wine while the other tapped his pen against his notepad.

Makoto gulped, eyeing the food on the table. There were only a few appetizers on the table, and the critic had mentioned wanting to taste some of the entrées, as well.

Makoto took a deep breath. He tucked the tray under his arm and reached for his order notepad and a pen.

"Would you like to order anything else while you taste the appetizers? I can go ahead and put in more orders for you," Makoto said, his hands ready.

A look of surprise flashed on the critic's face and he seemed to hesitate. He scratched his cheek and averted his eyes momentarily.

"Well, I suppose that would be a good idea, wouldn't it?" he said. He placed his glass of wine back down on the table and glanced at the menu. "I'll have the mackerel dish, the soup of the day, and… the entrée special of the day, as well."

Makoto quickly scribbled down his order and nodded with a timid smile, hoping that his face looked kind enough.

"Of course. I will put your order in right away," Makoto said. He bowed deeply to the critic. "Enjoy your meal."

Not waiting to see the look on the critic's face, Makoto turned on his heel and hurried back to the kitchen. He glanced around the kitchen, the notepad in his shaking grasp, and he approached one of the chefs at the front.

"I, uh… I have the orders for—"

The chef snatched the notepad from Makoto and ripped out the page from its spiral binding.

"Mackerel, soup, and special!" the chef called out to the kitchen, and then he dipped back deeper inside the kitchen to continue working on one of his dishes.

Makoto took a step back and awkwardly stood out of the way, his eyes trained onto the floor and his feet shifting his weight back and forth. He could feel his knees shaking with nerves and he was worried that they could buckle at any moment.

"Ah, there you are, Mako-chan!"

Makoto glanced up to see Nagisa's smiling face poking inside the kitchen door. He walked in and grabbed a tray to stack some plates on it.

"I saw the critic just now. He looked really impressed!" Nagisa said with wide eyes and an even wider smile.

Makoto blinked at him. "He… he did?"

"Yeah! After you left his table just now, he just stared after you for a few seconds. He wrote down some things before he even took a bite of food," Nagisa said as he stacked another plate on his tray. "You're doing great! Have you ever been a waiter before?"

Makoto bit his lip and rubbed the back of his neck shyly.

"No, I haven't. I had no idea that there would be so much pressure," Makoto said. He frowned and let his hands drop by his sides. "I really don't want to mess this up."

Nagisa hummed thoughtfully. "You know, Haru-chan doesn't like to beat around the bush."

Makoto glanced up at him sharply, wondering where Nagisa was going with that statement. Nagisa finished stacking the last plate onto his tray and he heaved it up over his shoulder.

"If Haru-chan didn't think you could do it, he wouldn't have asked you to stay," Nagisa said.

Makoto's jaw dropped. "Really?"

Nagisa nodded with a smile and passed by Makoto to get to the swinging door.

"He must trust you a lot, Mako-chan!" Nagisa chirped. He pressed on the door. "That means you can do it! Fight on!"

Nagisa pushed through the kitchen door and disappeared from sight.

Makoto took slow, deep breaths to calm himself down and then he turned to look at the chefs. He grabbed a fresh, clean tray from the rack and stood ready for the next order.

"Who is that?"

"He's wearing a fancy uniform…"

"Look, look! He's holding a sign!"

Haru stood at the front of the gate to the middle school with a deadpan expression on his face and a straight back. He held the sign in front of his chest and eyed students as they passed by, unknowingly leaning forward towards them.

"What does the sign say?"

A couple of students stopped in front of him to read the sign, their eyes squinting as they struggled to read the smudgy, jagged symbols. Haru turned towards them and pointed to the words on the sign.

"Are you the kids written here on this?" Haru asked bluntly.

The students jumped at his tone and then quickly shook their heads. Haru's brow twitched and lowered.

"Do you know who they are?" Haru asked, feeling his patience running thin.

The students shook their heads nervously and Haru sighed, turning his attention back to the front of the school. He stared straight ahead, watching as more students started to flee the building.

C'mon, where are you two? Haru thought.

He could vaguely remember what they looked like from all of the times he had seen them pass in front of the restaurant, but it was not clear. Heck, he even spoke to them face to face when he handed them food! And he still could not remember what they looked like.

Haru sighed. If only he had paid better attention to them at the time, then maybe he would remember them.

But Haru remembered Tachibana being so distressed that day that it was all he could think about.

Tachibana…

"Please…"

"You have to walk with them across the street. Don't let them cross by themselves."

"Please. Please watch out for them."

Haru's brows twitched upwards in a sorrowful expression. He lowered his head to stare at the sidewalk in front of his feet.

Tachibana's face had looked so terrified. It reminded him of when they were kids and Haru had almost drowned in the river.

"HARU-CHAN!"

Even though it was obvious that he was terrified, there was a lingering sadness in Tachibana's expression this time that Haru could not place.

I wish you could remember me, Haru thought.

If you could remember me, then maybe we could talk things out just like we used to.

And maybe…

Maybe we could be best friends again—

"Wait, Ran! Don't run!"

"You're too slow, Ren! Hurry up!"

Haru's head snapped up and he blinked back into focus.

Ran and Ren?

Haru glanced down at Tachibana's messy handwriting and studied the characters. Those were the names written on the chalkboard.

He looked back up to see a girl rushing towards the gate with a boy struggling to keep up.

Ah, now they looked familiar.

The girl had a smile on her face but it fell when she spotted Haru. She slowed to a stop, making the boy behind her smack into her back with a yelp. He lifted a hand to his nose and whined.

"Ow! Ran, why'd you—"

The boy stopped when he peeked around the girl's shoulder to peer up at Haru.

Haru blinked down at them and held out the chalkboard display.

"Are these your names on this?" Haru asked.

The two of them stared at the board and then nodded slowly. Haru's brows creased when he saw their expressions.

Why did they look so nervous?

"I'm here to pick you up," Haru said.

The two of them jumped and the boy gripped onto the girl's arm, tears suddenly springing from his eyes.

"H-Hey, what's going on?" the boy asked in a wobbly voice. "W-Where's Onii-chan?"

The girl remained frozen in place as her brother shook her, her wide eyes staring up at Haru. She did not say a word.

At that moment, dread dropped into Haru's stomach like a lead weight.

Something was not right.

But what *was* it?

Haru glanced down to see the boy starting to turn into a blubbering mess while the girl still stood frozen in place. Students passing by were starting to stare and whisper, and Haru had to act fast before he caused a panic.

"Your brother is still working," Haru blurted, wanting to calm them both before they caused a scene.

The two of them jumped and stared up at him. The girl's eyes flickered back to life and she blinked rapidly, cocking her head to the side with scrunched eyebrows. The boy's tears stopped but his sad look remained.

"He couldn't come and pick you up because he's still working," Haru said. "I volunteered to come and get you."

They exchanged looks with each other and then looked back to Haru.

"Are you taking us to the restaurant?" the boy asked.

"Yeah," Haru answered with a nod. "Follow me and I'll take you there."

"Oh, we know where it is!" the girl suddenly chirped, a smile back on her face. "Do we get to go inside?"

Haru blinked down at her, confused by her sudden change in attitude.

"Yes," Haru said. "But let's go. I still have to work."

Haru tucked the chalkboard display under his arm and turned to leave with the two of them walking next to him. The girl happily walked alongside of him while the boy stayed close, his hands clenched into fists.

"Aren't you that chef?" the girl asked.

Haru glanced down at her and nodded. "Yes. I'm the head chef and the owner."

"Oh, so you're Onii-chan's boss!" the girl said, practically jumping with excitement. "Ah, he told us your name. What was it again?"

"Nanase-san," the boy said quietly.

Haru turned his head to look at the boy, blinking at him. These two kids were polar opposites.

"Yeah, I'm Nanase Haruka. The owner of *Nanase Rest House*," Haru said as an introduction.

"I'm Ran!" the girl said as she waved her hand into the air. Then, she pointed to the boy. "And that's my twin brother Ren."

The boy, Ren, bowed his head slightly when Haru glanced at him, but he did not say anything else.

"You guys are twins?" Haru asked.

"Yep!" Ran answered.

Haru hesitated. He was sure he would have remembered seeing Tachibana's siblings growing up.

Although… if they were just in middle school, then perhaps the twins had not been born when Haru and Tachibana played together. He would have to ask their ages later.

They stopped at the intersection and Haru watched the cars zip by.

"Please. Please watch out for them."

Haru glanced down at the twins, eyeing them for signs of distress. But neither one of them had any kind of reaction. They just waited patiently until the light turned green.

Haru had confidence that the two of them would probably be all right, but he made a promise to Tachibana to watch them carefully and not allow them to walk across the street by themselves.

"Stay close to me when we walk across," Haru said.

Ran and Ren stared up at him briefly before Ran sighed and stared at him with a deadpan expression.

"Did Onii-chan ask you to do that?" Ran asked.

Haru, caught of guard by *another* one of this girl's mood swings, blinked at her.

"Yes," Haru answered. "Now, stay close."

He heard Ran sigh softly but she obeyed, sticking close to him as they walked across the street.

Once they were safely across, Haru could hear Ran chatting cheerfully to Ren about getting to see the inside of the restaurant, her foul mood suddenly gone.

What in the world? Haru thought.

When the three of them finally reached the restaurant, Haru pulled open the door and ushered them inside.

The first to greet them was Rei, his large eyes studying the twins carefully. He looked up at Haru questioningly, but Haru shook his head and waved his hand.

Haru turned and gazed around the main floor of the restaurant until his eyes landed on the table in the center of the room. The food critic was still seated at his table with several dishes in front of him. He was writing something down on his notebook when someone stepped in front of him to grab his attention.

It was Tachibana.

"Oh, it's Onii-chan!" Ren suddenly said, the tears finally gone from his face.

Haru snapped his head down to look at the twins, both of them smiling brightly.

"Let's go see him!" Ran said to Ren.

Ren smiled and nodded, and they both took a step forward to go towards Tachibana.

But Haru glanced up and noticed that Tachibana was talking to the food critic, a tight smile on his face and a stray drop of sweat sliding down his neck.

He did not want to add any more unneeded stress to Tachibana's already-slumped shoulders.

Before the twins could sprint across the restaurant, Haru grabbed them by their collars and yanked them back. They both fell backward into Haru's stomach, their heads bonking against each other.

"Onii-ch— Whoa!" Ran squeaked.

"*Ouch*," Ren muttered, his hands coming up to rub the side of his head.

"You can't bother him right now. He's busy," Haru told them.

The twins glanced up at him with pitiful looks on their faces, Ren looking teary-eyed and Ran pouting.

Haru sighed. Who knew children could be so difficult?

"You guys can go to the break room. When your brother has a minute, I'll send him to find you guys, okay?" Haru said.

Once the twins nodded in grim understanding, Haru led them to the far end of the restaurant to get them to the break room in the back. He tossed sharp glances over his shoulder to keep an eye on Tachibana, hoping that he was still in one piece. Luckily, Tachibana still seemed to be standing and wearing a smile. It was a strange smile but at least it was a smile.

Haru opened the door to the break room and a few employees looked over from their spots to gaze at them. They stood up straighter upon seeing Haru entering the break room but their eyes were laced with confusion as they saw the children entering through the doorway.

Haru pointed to the table that was next to the wall of lockers.

"You can sit at that table for now." He paused for a moment. "You guys probably have homework, right?" he asked.

Ran and Ren both released heavy sighs and Haru smiled. The twins trudged over to the table and plopped down their backpacks.

"I'll see how your brother is doing and then I'll see if I can let him visit," Haru said at the door.

"Okay," Ran said as she sat down in the chair.

"Mmn," Ren hummed with a shy nod.

Haru nodded to them and then stepped back into the main floor of the restaurant. His eyes immediately honed in on Table 17.

The food critic was still at his table, taking a sip of his wine and writing down notes in his book. But Tachibana was no longer standing in front of him.

Haru quickly zipped to the kitchen, flinging open the swinging door. He was immediately met with a slightly disheveled Tachibana, who was busy pacing back and forth in the kitchen. When he met Haru's gaze, his green eyes wide and he rushed over to his side.

"Did you pick them up? Are they okay? Where are they?" Tachibana asked, his eyes serious and worried.

Haru put up his hand immediately to soothe him and Tachibana froze on the spot.

"They're in the break room," Haru said. "Safe and sound."

Tachibana let out a huge sigh and slumped, hanging his head and putting a hand to his chest.

"Thank goodness," Tachibana said, his voice full of relief. He bowed his head. "Thank you, Nanase-san. Thank you so much."

Haru blinked down at him, a small red blush tinting the skin underneath his eyes. He pursed his lips and glanced away.

"Stop bowing already," Haru said.

Tachibana released a soft chuckle and tilted his head up, looking much more relaxed.

"Sorry! I'm just really relieved that they're safe," Tachibana said. "Can I go see them?"

Haru turned his head to look at the kitchen, eyeing the dishes that the chefs were busy making. Hands were stirring wildly and pans were moving from one side of the kitchen to the other. It was more chaotic than Haru had ever seen it before.

"Is the food critic done?" Haru asked, keeping his eyes on the chefs.

"No," Tachibana answered with a sigh, making Haru look back at him. Tachibana's shoulders slumped and Haru could see the thin sheen of sweat on the side of his neck. "He's ordering the entrées a few at a time, so he's trying them slowly."

Haru clicked his tongue.

Annoying.

"Hey, Nanase, you're back! C'mon, we need you to make a special for our *honored guest*," one of the chefs called from the back.

Haru bit back a groan, his hands clenching into fists by his sides. He took a sharp breath through his nose to try and calm his nerves.

"Yeah, be there in a minute," Haru said.

Haru glanced at Tachibana and studied him carefully. He knew Tachibana had been there since seven, but now it was nearing six in the evening. Haru felt some guilt weighing down on his shoulders.

Was this too much for Tachibana to handle?

He locked eyes with Tachibana, his hands curling into unsure fists.

"Can you wait to see your siblings until after the food critic leaves?" he asked.

Tachibana hesitated, his fingers twisting in front of his body for a moment, and then he nodded with a dejected look on his face.

Haru felt more guilt attack his chest and he reached up to touch Tachibana's shoulder.

"Thank you," Haru said softly, and he walked back into the kitchen.

He started to wash his hands at the sink, the guilt stabbing him in the gut at every movement, and he glanced over his shoulder to look at Tachibana's back.

Haru watched as Tachibana raised his arm to wipe his eyes.

Haru's chest suddenly felt ice cold. Had the stress really been so bad that he made him cry? Should he just make him go home?

He was about to turn off the faucet and go over to him when Tachibana suddenly took both of his hands and smacked his cheeks.

"All right!" Tachibana said in a loud whisper.

Then, Tachibana marched out of the kitchen, his head high and his shoulders squared.

Haru paused for a moment, but then he smiled. He should not have been surprised. Tachibana has shown nothing but hard work in the short time he had worked at the restaurant.

Don't give up. You can do it, Haru thought. He turned to the stove to start his next dish. *I know you can.*

"I noticed that you enjoyed your wine so I went ahead and brought you the bottle to take home."

"O-Oh, thank you very much!"

"Of course! Is there anything else I can get you at the moment?"

"Oh, uh… no, I don't think so."

"Okay. Your next batch of meals should be coming shortly. I'll go and see if they're behind."

"You don't need to rush! I'm doing fine."

"R-Right, of course. Please let me know if there is anything else I can get for you."

###

"Here are your two entrées. Um… the other two are on their way, but they're not quite done, yet. I am truly sorry for the wait."

"N-No need to bow, my boy."

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"Ha, don't apologize! I can taste these two meals while I wait."

"Of course. Oh, right! If you really like red wine, we have a different bottle that is similar but it's a little sweeter. Would you like to try it?"

"Oh? How did you know I have a sweet tooth?"

"Hehe, I have two younger siblings, so it's easy to tell when they like sweets."

"Ha ha, I see! Well, sure! Go ahead and bring me a glass."

"Of course! I will be right back."

###

"I wasn't sure if you wanted some water, but I brought you some just in case."

"My, my. Thank you very much. I was getting a little thirsty."

"Of course. Might I recommend a dish to you while you wait for your other order?"

"Oh, sure. What do you recommend, boy?"

"I recently had the green curry dish. I know it sounds more like a common dish, but it is really quite delicious!"

"Is that so? What did you like about it?"

"Well, let's see… the only way I could describe it is that it just reminds me of home. My mother used to make this dish all the time growing up and it became my favorite food. So, when I tasted Nanase's recipe for green curry, I was instantly reminded of my family. It was a dish that tasted like… home."

"Hmm… I see. Well, then! I can't pass up an opportunity like this! Put an order in for the green curry."

"Y-Yes, sir! Right away!"

After an extra hour of bringing out food and refilling wine, Makoto watched the food critic slap his notepad closed and then grab his coat from the rack. He thanked Makoto for the service, even bowing his head a little.

And in a flash, the food critic was gone.

Makoto sighed heavily when he saw his back disappear beyond the front doors and he quickly retreated to the kitchen.

When he got back to the kitchen, he was met with several pairs of eyes all staring at him with

curious expressions on their faces.

"Is he gone?" came Nagisa's voice nervously.

Makoto nodded, and the entire kitchen collectively sighed in relief, Nanase included. In an instant, the stress that was once weighing down heavily on everyone's shoulders had completely dissipated.

"Okay, we still have orders to fill, so get back to work," Nanase said to the entire kitchen.

Once the kitchen staff sprang back into life, Nanase turned to Makoto.

"You did a good job," Nanase commented.

Makoto's face flushed. "O-Oh? You really think so?" Makoto asked. He glanced down at the ground. "I messed up a lot, though."

Nanase simply shrugged. "It shouldn't matter. You stepped up when no one else would."

Makoto stared at Nanase in amazement. He could not recall him ever complimenting his other employees before.

"As a thanks, I'd like to cook you and your siblings dinner," Nanase said.

Makoto's eyes widened. "Y-You really don't have to do that! I was just happy enough to help!"

"I've already decided," Nanase said with his hand up, making Makoto click his jaw shut. "Now go ahead to the break room and I'll bring you guys food shortly."

Makoto paused for a moment, feeling his shoulders tense slightly, and he smiled. He bent at the waist in a bow.

"Thank you, Nanase-san," Makoto said.

Instead of waiting to hear Nanase's response, Makoto straightened his back and slipped out of the kitchen to go to the break room. He could feel the stress still attacking his nerves, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins. He could not wait to see his siblings, but all he wanted to do at the moment was sleep.

Makoto gently weaved his way to the break room and grabbed the doorknob. He was expecting to see his siblings sitting at the table with upset and angry faces. He knew he would have to give an explanation.

But when Makoto opened the door, he was completely surprised.

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto's face lit up when he heard their voices, his exhaustion suddenly melting away.

"Ran, Ren!" Makoto called, opening up arms for a hug. The twins barreled into him and squeezed in a tight hug. "I'm so glad you guys are okay."

"We were fine, Onii-chan!" Ran said. "We could have walked here by ourselves."

"Of course you'd say that," Makoto said with a sigh. "Now, then. Let's clear off the table. We're going to eat soon."

"We are?" Ran asked.

Makoto nodded with a smile. "Yep! Nanase-san is treating us to dinner."

Ran and Ren glanced at each other with wide smiles and then they rushed back to the table to clear off their books.

"Nanase-san is awesome!" Ran chirped.

"He's really nice," Ren said as he placed his books into his backpack.

Makoto smiled, completely agreeing. "Yeah, you're right."

"You guys wait here. I'm going to go thank Nanase-san one more time and then we'll go home."

"Okay, Onii-chan!"

Once they were done with the wonderful meals that Nanase had prepared for them, Makoto gathered up the plates and took them to the kitchen. The food was spectacular, and Makoto could help but feel a little envious of the food critic.

He stepped into the kitchen and handed the plates off to a busboy standing by the sink. He glanced around the kitchen, surprised to see that Nanase was no where in sight.

Confused, Makoto turned his gaze to a nearby chef.

"Do you know where Nanase-san is?" Makoto asked.

The chef blinked at him and then jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"In the back," he said bluntly.

Makoto cocked his head curiously. Nanase was in the back? Where the truck comes in? What on earth was he doing back there?

Makoto mumbled a quiet 'thanks' to the chef before slipping through the door to the back room…

…and almost tripping over a body sitting right in front of the door.

"S-S-Sorry! I didn't see you—Nanase-san?"

Nanase tilted his head up to look at him, his eyes blank. He had a clipboard in his hands, and Makoto squinted to see that it had the schedule of the waiters written on it. There were several red lines marked through several of the days in the following week.

"Is that…?" Makoto started.

"Yeah," Nanase said. "It's the schedule for the waiters for next week."

"Oh."

Nanase rested his chin on his free hand and stared down at the schedule. He sighed softly, and Makoto noticed that he had been doing that a lot today.

"The guy who usually schedules the waiters quit earlier today," Nanase explained. "Now that he's quit, I have to schedule everyone."

"Oh. That sounds… really inconvenient," Makoto said. He felt his gut twist a little at seeing Nanase look so down. It did not seem fair for him to do all of this by himself.

"Yeah, it is," Nanase answered. "Not only that, but I need to hire a new waiter."

Makoto's ears perked up.

A new waiter?

He would be hiring again?

All of those expensive apartment listings…

No leads on a second job…

"Two months can fly by in the blink of an eye."

Makoto's breath hitched slightly and he found the words spilling out of his mouth before he could stop them.

"I'll do it!" Makoto blurted.

Nanase whipped his head up to look at Makoto with wide eyes and parted lips.

"What?" Nanase said.

Makoto wanted to sink into the floor. Why did his mouth have to work faster than his brain?

"I mean, I'll take on the job to be a waiter here," Makoto explained.

Nanase stared at him for a moment, and then his brows rested heavily over his eyes.

"You already work here full time. I can't just let you work more hours," Nanase said.

Makoto's heart throbbed inside his chest.

He thought of Ran and Ren and their terrified faces as they are taken away in some strange car—never to be seen again.

No, Makoto thought. *I can't let them slip away!*

Makoto stood a little firmer, his hands curling into fists.

I can't lose them, too!

"Please!"

Makoto bent at the waist, once again bowing to Nanase. Nanase jumped, his jaw dropping at the sight.

"Oi!" Nanase grumbled.

"Please allow me to work as a waiter, too," Makoto said. "I was looking for a second job anyway. And I can learn! I can learn to do better than I did today, so please. *Please* let me work more for you!"

Makoto's eyes squeezed shut and he braced himself for an answer. He could feel his heart

pounding in his chest and his body began to shake. He knew not to get his hopes up, but he had to try, even if it made him look foolish in the process.

"Fine."

Makoto snapped his head up to look at Nanase with wide eyes.

Did he hear him correctly?

"W-What?" Makoto asked.

Nanase sighed and tapped his finger on the clipboard.

"You can train to be a waiter, but you can only work 20 extra hours a week. *Maximum*," Nanase emphasized.

Makoto hesitated, as if he could not believe his ears. And then, his face widened into a brilliant smile. He lowered his head once again.

"Thank you so much! I won't let you down!"

He heard Nanase huff out a tiny laugh, but it was obvious that he tried to hide it.

"Yeah, sure. Now stop bowing already and go home. We'll discuss your new job next week," Nanase said.

Makoto stood up straight and chuckled softly. He turned to the door and turned the doorknob.

"Right. Have a good night, Nanase-san!" Makoto called.

It was faint, but Makoto could have sworn that he heard a very quiet "You, too."

Once Makoto had changed out of his vest and tie, he hurried down to pick up the twins to head home. It was dark when they were walking home so Makoto made sure to keep his eyes on them.

"So are you going to be a waiter at night from now on, Onii-chan?" Ren asked.

"Well, not all of the time. It's more like a part-time job on top of the one I already have," Makoto explained.

"Oh, so you can make more money?" Ran asked.

Makoto smiled. "That's the plan."

"Then we can go to the movies?" Ran asked.

"Or get more food?" Ren asked.

Makoto nodded happily. "Yep! Once I save up enough."

And we'll be able to solidify you guys staying with me for good…

"But… won't you be super busy now, Onii-chan?" Ren asked sadly.

Makoto's heart twisted but he kept a smile on his face. He reached over and patted Ren's head.

"Yes, but this probably means that you guys will be able to hang out at the restaurant more," Makoto explained.

Ren's eyes widened and flashed in delight.

"R-Really?" Ren asked.

"Really," Makoto answered.

Ran and Ren turned to each other and started to chat excitedly about being able to try more food and desserts from Nanase's restaurant, and Makoto watched them talk with a fond smile on his face. He took a deep breath.

This could be good.

This could be a good step for them towards healing.

This could be the start of—

Suddenly, Makoto's phone started to buzz in his pocket. He took out his phone and glanced down at the screen.

He gulped quietly.

1 Incoming call:

Sousuke

Nervously, Makoto hit the green button.

"Hello?"

Sousuke blinked and then glanced down at his phone.

"Oh," Sousuke said into the phone. "You actually answered."

"Oh, shut up!" Makoto's voice rang on the other line. Sousuke chuckled softly at Makoto's whine. "So, Sousuke, what's up?"

Sousuke sat down on the bench in the locker room, his towel sitting around his shoulders. He leaned back and stared up at the ceiling, listening to his other teammates bustling in an out.

"I wanted to ask how your job was going," Sousuke said.

"Oh, my job? It's going great!" Makoto said. "I actually just got off."

Sousuke's brow twitched and he whirled around to look at the clock on the wall. It was close to 8pm.

"Don't you go in at 7 in the morning?" Sousuke asked.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed in response.

"Then why are you just now getting off? I thought you got off around 4."

Makoto laughed, and Sousuke could tell it was a nervous laugh. It made Sousuke straighten his

back on the bench.

"Well, actually, my boss just hired me on to be a waiter, too!" Makoto tried to play it off as no big deal, but that one sentence spiked his anger in a heartbeat.

"What do you mean you're a waiter, too?" Sousuke bellowed.

"No, no! It's not bad! I asked for the job," Makoto said. "And tonight was my first night. I mean, it wasn't too bad and I'll get the training and—"

"Why on earth would you ask for another job on top of your full-time job?" Sousuke asked.

"I just… I need it," Makoto said softly, his voice sounding a little disheartened. The sound made Sousuke's heart squeeze.

"Makoto…" Sousuke whispered.

"L-Listen, I can't talk about this now. Maybe some other time?" Makoto asked, almost pleadingly.

Sousuke opened his mouth, ready to argue. He wanted to tear into Makoto. He wanted to force Makoto to answer why he was taking on another job.

But…

"Fine," Sousuke said gruffly. "Just… is everything okay?"

There was a pause on the other line, and the pause itself was too long.

"Yeah, it will be," Makoto said. "Just trust me. I can handle it."

"Hmm," Sousuke hummed noncommittally.

"Ah, thank you, Sousuke. I'll talk to you later, yeah?" Makoto asked.

Sousuke sighed. "Yeah. See ya."

The call ended, leaving Sousuke to stare at his phone in his grasp.

Something's not right, Sousuke thought. *He doesn't sound all right.*

He huffed out a sigh and abruptly stood up from the bench, stuffing his phone into his pocket. He picked up his duffle bag and headed out of the locker rooms, walking into the main training pool area. He spotted his coach on the far end of the pool and he quickly approached him.

"Coach," Sousuke called.

The man in a white tracksuit turned around. There was a small Japanese flag on the breast of his jacket, along with the words *Japanese National Swim Team*.

"Ah, Yamazaki. What's up?" his coach asked, tucking his clipboard under his arm.

"Would I be able to take some time off soon?" Sousuke asked.

His coach pursed his lips and he rubbed his chin, tilting his head up to look at the ceiling.

"Well, we are having a break coming up soon. And the practice meets aren't for another month…" his coach mumbled. He shrugged and then nodded his head. "It should be fine in a couple of

weeks. Why? You wanting to take a vacation?"

Sousuke's brows lowered as he stared at the ground.

"Not necessarily," Sousuke said. "There's just a certain friend that I need to go visit."

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

But nothing's turned out how you wanted

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Another chapter for you :)
Once again, thank you so, so much Tayu-chan for the wonderful advice and fabulous editing job. You always give me such good ideas!! I'm very grateful to you!

Also, MORE FANART!!! The wonderful velvloid has done another amazing fanart from the last chapter!
Check it out here!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What about the promise?"

Sousuke blinked at his red-headed friend as they stood in front of the bus stop. He raised his arms and rested them behind his head.

"I still haven't thought of anything," Sousuke admitted.

The redhead's eyes lowered into a deadpan expression. "Aw, come on…"

Sousuke smiled brightly—a smile that reached his eyes.

"I guess I'll look forward to asking you the next time we meet," Sousuke said.

His friend paused and then smiled, a determined look in his red eyes.

"I'll see you around," he said.

"Yeah," Sousuke said with a smile.

They bumped fists, and just like that… his friend was gone and off to Australia to become a better swimmer. The bus left, leaving Sousuke to clench his fists inside his jacket pockets.

After a moment of waiting by the bus stop, he turned on his heel and left.

'I will stand on the stage next to you,' Sousuke thought as he headed home. 'So don't forget about me, Rin.'

Over the next several weeks, while Sousuke continued to swim during elementary school, Rin sent several letters describing his time in Australia. Sousuke read every single one and immediately wrote back, getting more and more excited every time he checked his mailbox.

But after a while, the letters became sparse, only arriving every couple of weeks. The letters spoke little of his experiences in Australia and more of his swimming, how his times had not improved and how the expectations were high.

And then, one day, the letters stopped coming altogether.

Sousuke's hand hit the wall with a loud smack, sending water droplets flying everywhere. He reared back and gasped for breath, twisting in his lane to look up at his coach.

"Nice work, Yamazaki! Your time improved by a whole second," his coach said. He paused for a moment to look at the pool to watch some of the other swimmers, his thumb still on his stopwatch. "But, you need to be careful. You were thrashing about more wildly. Smooth it out some and your time will go even faster."

Sousuke's brows pinched slightly but he nodded, grunting softly. He climbed out of the pool and pulled his swim cap and goggles off of his head. He pulled the goggles onto his arm and up around his shoulder as he walked towards the wall, turning his back to it to lean against it.

"Nice work," his teammate said, lifting a water bottle towards Sousuke. Sousuke took it with a slight nod and a small smile.

"Ah, thanks," Sousuke said.

His teammate leaned against the wall next to Sousuke and drank out of his own water bottle. After a long swig, his teammate turned to look at Sousuke.

"So, I hear you're taking off soon," he said.

Sousuke blinked at him and hummed in response.

"Where ya going?" his teammate asked. "Got a girlfriend you need to see?"

Sousuke rolled his eyes and took a swig of his water. "No, nothing like that."

"Then what? Just need a break?"

Sousuke tapped his finger against the water bottle and gazed out at the pool in front of him.

"I'm going to visit a friend," Sousuke explained.

"Hm? Your friend?"

"Yeah. I've known him since elementary school," Sousuke said.

"Wow, that's a long time. You usually don't stay in contact with people that long," his teammate said. "You guys catching up, then?"

Sousuke tilted his head back to gaze out of the windows that stretched towards the tall ceiling. The sun was shining brightly against the clouds, making the sky glow.

"Sort of."

The sun was shining against the clouds, making them glow.

Sousuke found himself sitting in his elementary classroom next to Rin's empty desk, his eyes lazily staring out the window. The morning bell had just rung and everyone was in their assigned seats. Sousuke could hear the teacher giving announcements about the day but her words went in one ear and out the other. He was tired and angry and lonely, confused as to why his friend had just

stopped talking to him. He just wanted to go home.

"Okay, before we begin the morning's lesson, I'd like to announce that there is someone new joining our class for the remainder of the year," the teacher said, the words catching Sousuke's ears.

Sousuke turned his head away from the window to stare at his teacher, barely interested in whoever would be joining their class. He could hear his fellow classmates whispering as the teacher walked to the doorway to let in the mysterious student.

"A new student? This late in the year?"

"Maybe a job transfer?"

"Or did they get kicked out of their last school?"

Sousuke rolled his eyes, struggling to care about the rumors that would start. A new student was always interesting but all Sousuke wanted was for his friend to come back. He did not care for someone new.

But then, the door slid open and in walked a tall boy with a mess of brown hair. He had a timid look on his face and his fingers twisted in front of him. His shoulders were up by his reddened ears and his gaze was pointed towards the floor.

Sousuke pitied him. For someone so tall, he was doing a great job at making himself look tiny.

"All right, everyone! This is our new student joining our class today for the rest of the year! Go ahead and introduce yourself," the teacher said.

The boy squeaked when he was addressed and then scrambled to face the class. He cleared his throat.

"M-My name is Tachibana Makoto. I-It's very nice to meet you!"

Tachibana bowed deeply to the class, and Sousuke could hear a few snickers coming from his classmates.

"He has a girly name!"

"I know! What's up with that?"

Sousuke's brows pushed together. That sounded very familiar.

'I have a girl's name, but I'm a boy! Nice to meet you!'

Rin would have introduced himself like that. Confident and proud. But Tachibana…

Tachibana straightened his back with a maddening blush on his cheeks, embarrassed out of his mind.

"Y-Yeah, well… I…" Tachibana stuttered his way through his introduction, trying to come up with a reason for his girly name. Finally, the teacher took pity on him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, it's good to have you, Tachibana-kun. There's an empty desk in the back."

Sousuke jolted when he realized that the teacher was pointing in his direction. He snapped his head to the side to look at the empty desk next to him, the realization slowly sinking in.

Rin's old seat would now be occupied by this guy?!

"Oh, thank you," Tachibana said to the teacher with a slight bow of his head.

Then, Tachibana made his way back to the desk next to Sousuke, gingerly pulling out his chair to sit down. He glanced at Sousuke and gave a shy smile.

"I guess we're going to be desk partners, then," Tachibana said.

Sousuke's eyes turned to gaze out the window once again. "I guess so."

"What's your name?"

Sousuke slid his eyes over to look at Tachibana, finally able to make out his green eyes. They were bright, a little droopy, but friendly.

What would Rin want him to do?

Sousuke sighed and turned in his seat to fully face him.

"Yamazaki Sousuke," he introduced a little plainly.

"Ah, nice to meet you, Yamazaki-kun!"

Then, Tachibana smiled. And it was a blinding smile, one that reached his eyes and made his head tilt to the side.

Sousuke's eyes widened.

His smile reminded him of Rin's bright smile.

Sousuke managed not to scowl, instead his lips pushing together in a small pout.

"Mmn. Nice to meet you, too."

"Sort of? What does that mean?"

Sousuke snapped out of his daze, remembering where he was. He turned to look at his teammate and blinked a few times.

"Ah. Well, I just need to visit him," Sousuke said, his brows furrowed in mild worry.

"Sounds like you guys are close," his teammate commented.

Sousuke nodded and hummed. "Yeah."

"Did you just go to elementary school with him?"

"Ah, no. We went to the same middle and high school, too," Sousuke said.

"Aw, how cute," his teammate teased.

"Shut it," Sousuke grumbled and he took another swig of water.

His teammate only laughed and shook his head. "So, was he on the swim team with you, then?"

Sousuke lowered the bottle away from his face to stare back up at the windows, watching as the sun disappeared behind another cloud. It sent rays of sunlight shining out in every direction.

"No," Sousuke answered quietly. He paused for a moment, fiddling with the strap of his goggles that were slung around his shoulder.

"Oh? Why not?"

Sousuke's hand squeezed his water bottle, crinkling the plastic slightly. He breathed slowly and glanced out at the pool, watching as his fellow teammates made soft splashes with each dive.

"He's afraid of water," Sousuke explained.

"Afraid of water?" his teammate repeated. He leaned back against the wall and tilted his head to look at the ceiling. "Wonder what could've caused that…"

Sousuke stayed quiet for a moment. He thought back to when Makoto had spoken to him one afternoon in elementary school, right when everyone was talking about summer vacation plans. Sousuke's other friends said that they were going to the beach and Makoto had immediately stiffened.

When Sousuke had approached him about it, Makoto had played it off as no big deal. But Sousuke, with the most patience he could muster at the tender age of 11, urged Makoto to tell him what was wrong. And Makoto, with shaking fingers, told him everything. Sousuke could not fully comprehend the horrors that Makoto had gone through, but knew that he wanted to protect him.

The two of them had been inseparable ever since.

"Well, it used to be just the ocean," Sousuke started.

"The ocean?" his teammate asked.

Sousuke nodded. "The fear started when someone he knew drowned in the ocean." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "But soon after that, he told me a close friend of his almost drowned in a river. He's been too afraid to even get into a pool."

"Whoa, that's… that's really awful," his teammate said. "Did he ever get over it?"

Sousuke's hand lowered down his side, his fingers curling into a weak fist.

"No."

"Sheesh, these uniforms are annoying," Sousuke said as he tugged on the collar of his shirt. He grumbled and sighed when it still did not loosen. He felt as if he were suffocating.

"I wouldn't try to unbutton it. I heard that the middle school teachers are more strict."

Sousuke glanced over to his friend, who was smiling softly at him. He raised his arms and cradled his head in his hands.

"Where'd you hear something like that, Makoto?" Sousuke asked his friend.

Makoto chuckled softly and scratched his cheek. "Um, I don't know, really. I just have a suspicion

that since we're older now, we're going to have stricter teachers."

Sousuke pouted. "That's nonsense. Middle school won't be scary."

"You never know!" Makoto defended.

They walked up to the front of the middle school and stopped when they saw the mass of students crowding the board next to the doors.

"Oh, they've posted our homerooms," Sousuke said casually. He dropped his hands to stuff them into his pockets.

"You think we'll be separated into different classes?" Makoto asked.

Sousuke shrugged and leaned to the side to study the board. Makoto squinted next to him, leaning forward to try and see the board.

"Are you sure you don't need glasses?" Sousuke teased.

"I can see just fine, thank you," Makoto retorted.

"Oh, yeah? Then why are you squinting?"

"I'm not!"

Once they found their names on the lists—both of them thankful that they were in the same class—the two of them headed inside to change out their shoes and seek out their homeroom.

"So, what clubs are you thinkin' about joining?" Sousuke asked as they entered their new classroom.

Makoto shyly rang his hands together as they passed by some of their classmates.

"Probably just the literature club or something," Makoto said with a small smile.

"Huh? Don't you want to join a sport?" Sousuke asked, his brow quirked. "You're good at basketball."

Makoto chuckled softly and rubbed the back of his head, unsure.

"Maybe. But I'm super clumsy, so I don't know how well I would do on a team setting," Makoto insisted. "Anyways… what are you joining?"

Sousuke smiled, tossing his hands behind his head and closing his eyes.

"The swim club, obviously."

"Ah… right."

Souskuke's eyes popped back open at the hesitant tone in Makoto's voice and he glanced over to see his friend fiddling with his fingers, looking a little distressed. Sousuke gulped, his arms dropping to his sides.

"Hey, you don't have to go to any of the meets," Sousuke said immediately.

Makoto startled and shook his hands in the air. "No, no! I want to go! You're my friend, Sousuke. I

want to support you."

"You don't have to force yourself," Sousuke said with a slight pout.

"I'm not," Makoto said with a smile. "I've gotten… better. I promise."

Sousuke studied Makoto's face carefully, seeking out any cracks in his façade. But, to Sousuke's relief, Makoto seemed genuine.

"Well, if you're not gonna join a sport, then you have to go running with me," Sousuke said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Eh?! Why?" Makoto asked.

"I know how much you like sweets, Makoto. I've gotta keep you in shape!"

"B-But—"

"No excuses!"

"No? That's a shame," Sousuke's teammate commented sadly.

Sousuke sighed and nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"Yeah, it is," Sousuke said. "But he was really supportive. He worked out with me all the time."

His teammate blinked at him and then smirked. "Did he go *willingly* or did you make him go?"

Sousuke's brow twitched and he glanced away, lifting his water bottle to his lips to take a drink. His teammate laughed and shook his head.

"Thought so. Poor guy," his teammate said.

"Shut up."

Now that Sousuke had thought about it, he probably should have been easier on Makoto. But he knew Makoto did not hate him for it. He had the body of an athlete now. If anything, Makoto should be thankful that he was toned and not a bloated whale.

"Okay, everyone! Wrap it up for today!"

Sousuke jumped at the sound of his coach's voice bouncing off the tall walls. He glanced over to see the rest of the team cooling down or climbing out of the pool. Sousuke did not realize how much time had passed. The practice went by quickly today.

"Well, that's that."

Sousuke turned to see his teammate push himself up from the wall and stretch, looking at Sousuke with a small smile.

"You goin' to get lunch?" he asked.

Sousuke paused and then shook his head.

"I'll probably head over to the gym for a bit," Sousuke said.

"Eh? Again?" his teammate asked with a slight whine in his voice.

"Yep," Sousuke said as he slung his towel over his shoulder. He turned to head into the locker room, his teammate following close behind.

"Don't overdo it, man," his teammate said with a sigh.

Sousuke waved him off confidently. "I won't."

Something felt… off.

As Sousuke slammed his palm against the side of the pool, he felt it: a tug on his right shoulder that sent prickling pains down his arm. But just as quickly as the pain surfaced, it disappeared.

He grunted and reached over to knead the skin, trying to find a source for the pain, but he felt nothing.

"You okay, Yamazaki?"

Sousuke turned his head to see his teammate standing in the lane beside him with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah," Sousuke answered. He let go of his shoulder and walked forward to pull himself out of the pool. "Probably just a spasm."

"Ah, okay. Well, if you're sure," his teammate said.

Sousuke yanked off his swim cap and goggles from the top of his head. He headed to the locker rooms to change and head home for the day.

"Yeah," he said over his shoulder. "I'm fine."

Once he had changed, he left the pool area and walked out to the hallway of his high school where he was met with a familiar face.

Makoto was sitting on the bench just outside the pool with a book in his hands and a gentle smile on his face as he flipped a page. When Sousuke came closer, Makoto glanced up at him in surprise.

"Oh, you're done already, Sousuke?" Makoto asked. He set the book down in his lap. "You're usually still training for at least another half-hour."

Sousuke sighed through his nose and adjusted his bag over his shoulder. He winced when the strap of his duffle bag dug into his shoulder and a spike of pain jolted down his arm. He reached up to rub his shoulder, his thumb rubbing soft circles into the muscle to ebb the pain away.

What in the world was going on?

"Sousuke?"

Sousuke jumped at the worried tone of his best friend, turning his head to see Makoto looking up at him with slightly widened eyes. His lips were parted and his brows were furrowed.

"Are you okay?" Makoto asked. His eyes moved to Sousuke's shoulder. "Is your shoulder bothering you?"

Sousuke's hand dropped from his shoulder and he stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"It's just stiff from practice. You ready to go?" Sousuke asked, trying to steer the conversation away from his shoulder.

Makoto hesitated, his eyes flitting back and forth from Sousuke's shoulder to his face. Then, he closed his book and placed it in his backpack.

"Yeah, I'm ready," Makoto said as he stood to his feet and threw his backpack over his shoulder. "But, are you… your shoulder… is it—"

"It's fine," Sousuke snapped. He immediately regretted his tone as Makoto flinched, but he tried to breeze past it by walking towards the exit. "Let's go. I need help on the literature homework."

Makoto's footsteps pattered behind him until he caught up next to his side.

"What? It was so easy!" Makoto said with a smile.

Sousuke smiled lightly as they walked out of the pool building and to the street, his shoulder starting to throb more and more with each step.

Sousuke slowly lowered the bar down just above his chin as sweat dripped down his neck. He huffed out a soft sigh and stared up at the ceiling, feeling the burn in his chest and shoulders. He had managed to bench with more weights this time and he had done several more reps. He was thankful he did not need a spotter today.

He leaned up from the bench and rolled his right shoulder in a few tight circles. Out of habit, he expected to feel a sharp throb or sting. But when he was met without any resistance or pain, he sighed in relief. It had been a few years since his shoulder had acted up. It was now stronger than ever.

And it was all thanks to Makoto.

Sousuke ran his fingers through his hair. He wondered what would have happened if Makoto had not been there. Where would he be now? Would he had made it to the national team at all? Or would…

Or would Sousuke have been reduced to giving up swimming for good?

Sousuke shook his head and sighed, feeling his heart leap at the thought. It was thanks to Makoto's quick thinking and pushiness that Sousuke was able to pursue his dream.

He took a deep breath and pulled his arm across his chest to stretch out his shoulder.

"I won't ruin your hard work, Makoto," Sousuke mumbled to himself as he rolled his shoulder. "You got me here, so I'm staying here."

More time had passed and Sousuke's shoulder still ached with each little movement, but he did his best to ignore it. He still trained like he normally would and still forced Makoto to work out with him whenever he could. He iced it every night he went home and rubbed muscle cream on it afterwards. His shoulder began to have a red glow around it, but Sousuke grit his teeth and just shoved a shirt over his head.

It was not until he took Makoto to the gym one day that he knew he was in trouble.

"Are you sure you're not overdoing it?" Makoto asked, concern written all over his face.

"Yeah," Sousuke said. He could already feel sweat on his neck and he had not even picked up a weight yet.

Makoto's brows creased. "You've just seemed really exhausted and stressed lately."

Sousuke shrugged, biting back a wince when his shoulder prickled in pain.

"The tournament's coming up," Sousuke said. "I want scouts to look at me."

Makoto smiled softly but his eyes were still upturned in concern. "Yeah, but you still have over a year to worry about that, right?"

"Shut up," Sousuke groaned. He glanced around, thankful that the gym was empty tonight. "I'll start on the weights."

"A-Ah, let me know when you need me to spot you," Makoto called after him.

"Yeah, yeah."

Makoto got to work on one of the treadmills while Sousuke meandered to the dumbbells on the other side of the room. He put down his water and reached for one of the weights. He sat down on a bench and shifted the weight into his left hand. He bit his lip. He knew he was avoiding the inevitable.

After doing way too may reps on his left arm, Sousuke knew he had to switch. He glanced over to see Makoto still going at it steadily on the treadmill and then he turned around to look in the mirror in front of him. It was a sickening sight, with the dark circles under his eyes and the stress lines on his face.

'Whatever. This is nothing. Just a pulled muscle.'

Sousuke switched the dumbbell into his right hand.

'Just have to take it slow and—'

A sharp pain spiked through his shoulder and sent tingles down his bicep, making him cry out and drop the dumbbell onto the floor, nearly smashing his foot in the process. His left hand came up to grip his shoulder, the pain making him dizzy.

'What… what's going on?'

"…suke? Sousuke!"

Sousuke could barely register his name being called, the voice muffled and distant. Yet, there Makoto was, kneeling in front of him and holding his elbows. Why did his voice sound so far away?

"Mako—" Sousuke winced and choked on his name as another spike of pain ripped through his shoulder. It felt like it was on fire, a constant stabbing that made Sousuke think his shoulder was falling off.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Makoto asked frantically. His eyes flitted to the shoulder Sousuke was cradling and he gently leaned up to move Sousuke's hand.

"Don't!" Sousuke growled.

"I just want to see," Makoto said.

"I told you, I'm fine—"

"You're obviously not!" Makoto shouted back, his eyes apologetic but his tone firm.

Sousuke flinched and then froze, his eyes widening at Makoto's voice.

"Now move your hand," Makoto said, his voice softer. "Please, Sousuke."

Sousuke grimaced and then slowly moved his hand down and away from his shoulder. Makoto, with gentle hands, pulled down the collar of Sousuke's shirt to look at his shoulder, and Sousuke flinched when he heard him gasp.

"Sousuke!" Makoto breathed. "Y-Your shoulder, it's… it's swollen."

Sousuke pinched his lips together into a tight line, keeping his eyes fixed on the floor in between his feet and Makoto's knees.

"How long has it been like this?" Makoto asked.

Sousuke's brows creased, trying to think back to when the pain had first begun.

"Maybe… maybe a few months."

"Sousuke…"

Sousuke finally looked up to see Makoto's face scrunched up in worry, his jaw dropped and his eyebrows upturned.

"Sousuke, you… we need to get you to a doctor," Makoto said.

"It's just a pulled muscle," Sousuke said.

"And what if it's not?"

Sousuke flinched, his hands tightening into fists. He could not say it. He did not want to admit it.

"Sousuke, I know you think that this will stop your training and slow you down," Makoto started, and Sousuke's breath seized inside his chest. "But if you don't go see a doctor now and get it treated, then you might never be able to train ever again."

Sousuke inhaled sharply as a sob threatened to burst from his throat. He hung his head and pressed his palm to his eye to stop the stinging.

It hurt.

He couldn't…

A hand gripped his good shoulder, squeezing reassuringly, and the first few tears slipped out.

"I won't let this stop you from pursuing your dream, Sousuke," Makoto said. "You will make it to the national stage. You will."

Sousuke sucked in a stuttering breath and hung his head down lower until his forehead rested on Makoto's shoulder. Makoto reached up to touch the back of his neck, a few of his fingers sliding

into Sousuke's dark hair.

"I promise you will, okay? But we need to get you to a doctor," Makoto said, squeezing Sousuke's neck. "Let's go home. We'll tell your mom to schedule you an appointment."

With his voice stuck behind the lump in his throat, all Sousuke could do was nod against Makoto's shoulder. Makoto hummed in response and helped Sousuke to his feet.

"Ah, I didn't want to work out anyway," Makoto said in a light, teasing voice.

Sousuke huffed out a breath and managed a small smile, the lump dissolving in his throat.

"You never do."

Sousuke plopped down on his bed, a towel on his wet hair that was fresh from a shower. He scrubbed his head a few times and then his eyes flitted over to the clock in his bedroom. It was close to ten in the evening.

With a grunt, he reached over to his nightstand to grab his phone, searching down the contacts until he reached his best friend's name. He quickly hit the green button and lifted the phone to his ear, hoping and praying to hear that cheerful voice pick up on the other line.

Makoto, of course, did not answer, his phone going to voicemail after a few rings. Sousuke sighed and pulled the phone from his ear, quickly opening a new message.

To: Makoto

Hey, you said you would talk to me about this new job stuff. Call me?

Sousuke waited, his eyes glued to the screen. After a few minutes with no response, Sousuke clicked his tongue and let his phone drop onto his bed. He leaned back, crossing his arms above his head and resting his head on his hands. He stared up at the dark ceiling for a moment, feeling his brows furrow. He lazily turned his head towards his nightstand to see a picture of him and Makoto at one of Sousuke's meets. Sousuke was holding a trophy in his hands.

"Idiot," Sousuke said aloud, his voice booming in the small room. He glared at the picture. "You wanted to be by my side through everything but why can't you answer a damn phone call now?"

Sousuke huffed and turned his head away from the picture, instead staring up at the ceiling once again.

"Idiot," he repeated.

Sousuke remembered Makoto being there for him through almost everything, even managing to face his fears to watch him swim at his meets. Makoto was the most supportive person Sousuke knew.

Sousuke turned his head towards his desk, his eyes catching more pictures of them pinned to the wall. Several of them were taken during their times in high school together, whether at a meet or even graduation. But one picture caught Sousuke's eye.

Sousuke and Makoto were sitting on the steps that led to the Yamazaki household, and Sousuke's arm was cradling in a white sling.

Sousuke huffed.

Even then, Makoto was there for everything.

"What's the verdict?"

Sousuke sat on the patient's bed with Makoto standing next to him as the doctor eyed the x-rays and scans with a scrutinizing gaze. Neither one of them could make heads or tails of the scans but they trusted the doctor's words.

Sousuke was fidgeting in his seat, waiting for the doctor to answer his question. The more the silence hung in the air, the more his nerves started to wither. He was thankful for Makoto's presence. He would have gone completely insane in a shower stall somewhere if he had not been by his side.

"Well," the doctor started, turning back to look at Sousuke with a small smile. "It looks like we caught it early enough. No need for surgery."

They both sighed in relief and Makoto lifted a hand to his chest.

"Thank goodness," Makoto breathed.

Sousuke felt himself slump a little on the bed, his heart slowing to a normal pace. He turned to Makoto to see his bright smile and he could not help but smile back.

"So," Sousuke said, turning back to the doctor. "What happens next?"

Sousuke's brows twitched. He remembered exactly what happened after that.

"Sousuke. Wake up."

"Nnn."

"Come on! Your physical therapy starts in 30 minutes! We have to leave now if we want to make it in time!"

"I'm still sleeping."

"No, you're not."

"So bossy…"

"All right, that's it! Let's… go!"

"W-Wha?! Hey! Don't just drag me out of bed!"

"Hehe, how does it feel to be on the other end?"

"I'm going to kill you."

"You can, but only after you go to physical therapy!"

"…Fine. You're buying me a soda today."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go already!"

"Meddlesome, as usual," Sousuke mumbled out loud.

But then, Sousuke chuckled to himself, realizing that he could not have gotten through that therapy on his own. It was tough and annoying, and the pain was almost unbearable. And yet, Makoto did not leave. Even when Sousuke threatened to bash his face in, Makoto barely even flinched. Instead, Makoto forced Sousuke to go back, week after week, until his shoulder was as good as new.

Sousuke sighed. He was incredibly grateful.

He huffed, remembering that Makoto even managed to smile for him after every therapy session. Even after all of the threats and harsh glares, Makoto still never left his side.

I definitely owe him for all of the garbage I put him through, Sousuke thought.

Sousuke's eyes slowly slid shut, feeling the heaviness of the day start to take control. His thoughts were stuck on his high school days, his mind beginning to drift off until sleep took control.

Idiot…

"See? I knew you could do it, Sousuke! And you doubted me!"

"Sousuke, I passed! I'm about halfway done until I can graduate. Then I can take my teacher's licensure exam!"

"You made it to the national team?! Sousuke, that's amazing! I knew you could do it!"

"Wow, so… that means you're going to be an Olympic athlete. Wow… my best friend, in the Olympics."

"Don't forget about me when you become famous, okay?"

"Sousuke."

"Sousuke!"

"Sou…"

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"Is this Yamazaki Sousuke?"

Sousuke paused at hearing the unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line. He held the phone tightly in his grasp and swallowed, his brows pushed together. Why was his heart pounding so hard?

"Yeah, that's me."

His voice trembled. It usually never did that.

"I see. It seems that you are listed as an emergency contact for Tachibana Makoto," the woman said.

Sousuke stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, not bothering to apologize to the person who had bumped into his back. The words rapidly bounced around in his head before processing into his brain.

Emergency contact?

Yes, that was true.

But his parents were the first two on the list. Sousuke's name was third.

So…

How bad was this emergency that he had to be called?

"Do you recognize that name?" she asked.

"Y-Yes," Sousuke stuttered.

The world around him turned into white noise, the woman's voice on the other line the only voice sounding crystal clear.

"Okay. I am calling you to inform you that Tachibana-san has been involved in an accident and is currently in the hospital."

Sousuke's breath hitched, his heart jumping into his throat.

"W-What?"

Sousuke sucked in a violent breath of air as the dream faded. His eyes popped open to see the ceiling. For a moment, he was unsure of where he was and his hands patted the loose blankets around him. His eyes darted around the room until it landed on the digital clock on his nightstand.

It was close to four in the morning.

Ah, right. He was in his bedroom.

Once his heart had slowed down some, he sat up and rubbed his hands over his face. He could still hear the echoes of everything that changed their lives forever coming back to haunt him.

The drive to get his best friend's shell-shocked siblings.

The hospital.

Makoto's frantic voice when he found out about his parent's deaths.

That stupid funeral.

Sousuke heaved in another breath and wiped the sweat from his brow. He could still hear the strained tone of Makoto's voice shortly after the funeral, when Makoto had been barely released from the hospital.

"Makoto, you shouldn't be up walking around right now. You need to rest."

"But, Sousuke… I need to find a job. I have to be able to provide for my siblings."

"I know, but… I'm here, too. You can come and live with me."

"I… I can't do that, Sousuke. You just made it to the national team. We would be a burden to you."

"You're not a burden, Makoto! You could never be a burden. You're my best friend. I want to help you."

"Sousuke… I can't put that stress on you. Your apartment is too small for all of us, and we can't afford a new apartment."

"Well… what if your siblings lived with my parents while you go to school? You don't have to drop out."

"I… Sousuke… they're the only family I have left. I… I can't just let them go. They need me."

"Makoto…"

"I want them to stay with me. Please try to understand, Sousuke."

"W-Well… what if I asked my dad to help you to get a job?"

"A job?"

"Yeah, my dad could probably help you. He knows a lot of people in Tokyo."

"I… yeah. That… that sounds like a good idea."

"Okay. But… I still don't want you to take this on by yourself. I'm completely against it."

"I know, Sousuke. But, thank you. Thank you for caring about me."

Sousuke rubbed his face, desperately trying to shake the terrible memories away. He sighed.

If anyone was the idiot, it was him, not Makoto. He never should have let Makoto go off on his own. He should have forced Makoto to stay with him, regardless of what he wanted. They could have gotten a bigger apartment together, a big one enough for both of them and the twins.

Damn it, Makoto, Sousuke thought as he held his head in his hands. *Why do you have to be so damned stubborn?*

A soft buzz pulled Sousuke from his thoughts and he dropped his hands from his face. He glanced over to his phone, still abandoned on the far side of his bed, and he picked it up. His heart jumped when he saw it was a text from his best friend.

From: Makoto

Hi, Sousuke! Yeah, I know we need to talk, but I'll call you when we're both not too busy.

Too busy?

Sousuke immediately opened up a text to reply.

To: Makoto

Too busy? What the hell are you talking about, idiot? Just answer your phone.

In a small fit of frustration, Sousuke sent the text. After a few moments of rereading his own text, he sighed, realizing how harsh he had sounded. Now was not the time to take out his own frustrations on his fragile friend. He thought about their strange phone call the other night.

"I just… I need it."

"L-Listen, I can't talk about this now. Maybe some other time?"

"…Yeah, it will be. Just trust me. I can handle it."

He was lying.

Sousuke could recognize the lie in Makoto's voice. He took a few deep breaths and sent another text.

To: Makoto

I'm just worried.

He knew Makoto was probably asleep at this hour, so he tossed his phone aside and plopped back onto the pillow.

I really am worried, Makoto.

The next morning, Sousuke walked into his coach's office, his duffle bag in hand and a determined look on his face.

"Ah, Yamazaki. Good morning. You're here early," his coach said.

"Yeah. I wanted to talk about the schedule again," Sousuke said.

"Oh, of course. Let me look here."

The coach picked up a clipboard from his desk and flipped through a few pages, eyeing them carefully. His eyes flitted up and down the page and his free hand came up to rub his chin. When he found what he was looking for, his eyes lit up and he smiled softly.

"Ah, here it is! Yep, you're all cleared to take five days off," his coach said.

"When?" Sousuke asked.

"Oh, right. Uh… let's see, three weeks from Monday," his coach said.

Sousuke's brows furrowed, his hand clenching around the strap of his duffle bag.

"Three weeks," Sousuke repeated, his voice lowering. "Got it."

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

You won't let go

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your patience and I'm so, so sorry that this is late. Life was just really stressful, you know?
Please check my Tumblr for any updates on delays on chapters.

Also, my schedule might be off now since I'm posting late, but bear with me. You guys are awesome!

Once again, thank you so so much Tayu-chan for helping me out when I was super stressed. You deserve all the credit for this one<3

Well, here's another chapter!

Happy Reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"'In my line of work, one word can either edify or destroy a business. I have seen a large variety of restaurants, from places with terrible leadership to upscale and elegant five-star establishments that have been around for years.'"

The entire restaurant staff was gathered in the kitchen as Rei read aloud the article from the newspaper. It was almost a front-pager.

Makoto stood next to Nagisa, his eyes glancing back and forth to Nanase, who stood behind Rei with his arms folded across his chest. To an unobservant eye, Nanase seemed stoic and calm. But Makoto could see the way his brows were lower than usual. He kept an eye on him as Rei continued.

"'Usually, determining the right words to say is easy. After all, I've been in this line of work for many years. And when a popular new restaurant opens, especially when owned by a very young entrepreneur, I find it my duty to give them the honesty they deserve—whether it is good or bad. However, my most recent visit to an up and coming restaurant has opened my eyes.'"

Makoto felt his heart leap. Was that a good thing? He glanced around to see some of the other staff leaning forward with curious looks on their faces.

Rei cleared his throat and readjusted his glasses before he continued.

"'*Nanase's Rest House*, a new upscale and classy restaurant, recently opened on the West side of town. It has generated quite a buzz, with its reputation for having the finest of dishes Tokyo has ever seen. Not only this, but I heard that it was owned by 22-year old Nanase Haruka. With this new information, I immediately jumped into action and booked a reservation.'"

"Tch, yeah. By *force*," one of the waiters scoffed.

A couple of them nodded their heads in agreement and Rei cleared his throat to continue.

"'There was a few miscommunications upon my arrival, which was a little displeasing, but when I was able to get the food, I was amazed. Each dish was prepared in great care with plentiful spices in each one. I was truly amazed at the skills of the chefs as well as the mastermind behind the recipes.'"

Makoto smiled and glanced over to look at Nanase, who was now looking a little more relaxed. Makoto sighed slowly and put a hand to his chest.

"Thank goodness," Makoto whispered. He turned to look at Nagisa beside him. "But I guess I had nothing to worry about. Nanase-san's recipes are really good."

Nagisa nodded cheerfully. "Haru-chan knows what he's doing."

Makoto nodded in response and opened his mouth to say more, but stopped when he heard Rei clear his throat again.

"'But, it was not only the food that left me craving more, but the courtesy and kindness of the wait staff were phenomenal. I found myself pleasantly surprised at the waiter's genuine compassion towards me as a customer. Some would say that it could have been out of my job title, but I have no doubt that this young man would do this for any customer, not just for myself. To the staff of *Nanase's Rest House,* I thank you for a fine experience and I hope to be back again in the future.'"

The staff froze on the spot, Rei's glasses slipping down his nose some. Even Nanase stood wide-eyed at the paper in Rei's hands.

Then, seemingly all at once, the entire staff turned to look at Makoto. Makoto flushed, feeling panic start to rise.

Wait, what did the food critic say? Was… was that about me?!

"Good job, Mako-chan!"

Suddenly, he felt a pair of thin arms wrap around his middle and a bush of blond hair filling his sight. Makoto glanced down at Nagisa, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"M-Me?" Makoto whispered.

"Ey! Nice work, Tachibana!"

"Yeah, good job!"

Makoto glanced up to see the staff nodding their heads at him, their usual tired eyes crinkling with smiles. He blushed a little, reaching up to scratch his cheek.

"W-Well, I couldn't have done it without—"

"Don't sell yourself short."

Makoto glanced over to see Nanase standing in front of him, his eyes fierce and determined.

"You did a good job. So be proud of that," Nanase said.

And then, Nanase smiled. It was a small smile, but genuine, and Makoto felt his heart leap. Makoto smiled back and bowed his head.

"Thank you very much!" Makoto practically shouted, earning a few laughs from some of the staff members. He heard Nanase huff out a laugh again and he leaned back up to see him covering his mouth with his hand.

"Yeah, yeah. Enough of that. Just get to work. You have your waiter training tonight," Nanase said. And then he turned to the rest of the staff. "That goes for everyone else, too. We have a restaurant to open. Let's get to work."

With a few *yes, sir's*, the staff started to disperse. Nagisa unraveled himself from Makoto and slapped him on the back, congratulating him once again. Rei even nodded at Makoto on his way out, mumbling something about *beauty* and *elegance*. It left Makoto standing there in the middle of the kitchen, his mind reeling on his upcoming training with the other waiters.

Oh, right! Training! I almost forgot!

"Um, Nanase-san!" Makoto called before Nanase disappeared into the kitchen.

Nanase stopped in his tracks and turned around to face him, his eyes soft and expression open.

"Would it be all right if my siblings were to come here after school when I have my second shift?" Makoto asked, his hands reaching down to grip the apron tied around his waist. "I know that it's asking a lot from you, but… they… it's too far for them to go home on their own."

Nanase paused for a moment, his eyes blinking silently at Makoto. Makoto squirmed a little under his scrutinizing eye, afraid of the possibility that he would say no.

What would he do if he could not go and get the twins before his shift?

There was nowhere else for them to go and Makoto did not want them travelling in the streets by themselves.

The cars.

Makoto did not want them near the cars.

It was way too risky and way too dangerous for—

"Yeah, that's fine," Nanase said.

Makoto's panic left him in a rush as he snapped his head up to meet Nanase's gaze. He smiled and sighed in relief, his body automatically lowering down into a bow.

"Oh, thank you so much, Nanase-san!"

Nanase sighed above him. "I told you to stop bowing so much."

"Ah, right. Sorry," Makoto said with a smile.

He was not really sorry.

"It's fine. Quickly go get them before your shift starts."

"Yes, sir."

Makoto bowed his head one last time and turned to leave, a bright smile on his face. He passed by Nagisa and Rei at the front of the restaurant, waving them off with a small smile and a quick "Be

right back!" He pushed through the front doors of the restaurant and hurried down the sidewalk with a spring in his step.

I can't wait to tell them about the review! Makoto thought happily as he stopped at the crosswalk.

Once the light changed, Makoto practically sprinted across the street, skidding to a stop just outside the gates of the school. He glanced around and watched as students started to leave from the school.

They're going to be so excited! Makoto thought.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, about to check the time, when he realized that he was in the middle of writing a text to Sousuke from the other night.

It was strange that Sousuke would be texting him in the middle of the night, but he had received two texts around four in the morning. His second message still made his heart squeeze a little.

I'm worried.

Makoto let out a soft sigh, shaking his head fondly, and quickly typed out a new message.

To: Sousuke.

Sorry, Sousuke. I didn't mean to make you worry. I'll call you later!

Makoto smiled brightly as he pocketed his phone, confident that he could now fully convince Sousuke that he was fine, especially with the review. It would serve as proof that Makoto could handle himself and Sousuke would be worry-free. He would have to call Sousuke that night to explain everything without sounding like a total pathetic loser. But first, he would have to pick up his siblings and get to training—

"Why are you always picking fights, Ran?!"

"Me? *You* are the one who can't defend yourself! Why don't you grow up?!"

Makoto snapped his head up at the distressing sounds coming from the school. His high mood flushed out of his system as he saw a fuming Ran with an equally distressed Ren in tow. Ren had tears in his eyes but his face was scrunched up in something akin to anger.

"I don't *ask* you to help me!" Ren yelled.

Ran suddenly stopped in her tracks and whirled around to get in Ren's face. Her hands were balled into tight fists by her sides, and Makoto worried that she might actually throw a punch.

"You never thanked me for it, either!" Ran spat.

Ren recoiled, practically spiraling into hysterics as he blubbered out some response that Makoto could not quite understand. Makoto hurried to meet them halfway, grabbing each one by the shoulder and pulling them apart.

"Whoa, guys!" Makoto said, trying to keep his voice down.

He was on high alert, shock coursing through his body as he tried to decipher what was happening in front of him. He knew that Ran was having trouble with her attitude and Ren was oversensitive, but since when did they start to use those feelings against each other?

"What in the world is going on?" Makoto asked.

Ran, with bared teeth, cut her eyes at Makoto and then sent a harsh glare at Ren. Ren flinched, a stray tear flinging out of his eye.

"Nothing," Ran spat, shrugging off Makoto's hand. She turned towards the gates of the school and started to walk away, her feet stomping on the concrete.

Makoto sputtered, looking back and forth between a stunned Ren and a fleeing Ran.

"Ah, w-w-wait! Ran!" Makoto called. He glanced down at Ren and gave his back a soft push, jolting him out of his shock. "Let's go, Ren."

Luckily, Ren snapped out of his daze and quickly followed his older brother to the crosswalk, where Ran had stopped.

"You can't just go off by yourself," Makoto scolded Ran, still trying to keep his voice calm.

Ran sent him a shuddering glare and then huffed, looking away with a scowl. Makoto grimaced and then glanced down at Ren, looking for any kind of explanation, but Ren's eyes were glued to his shoes. There was still a mixture of frustration and sadness on his face.

He had never heard Ren shout so vehemently back at Ran before. He would normally whine, and when he could not come up with a response, he would remain quiet. But his outburst sparked alarm in Makoto's chest.

Maybe they were fighting more than he had realized.

Makoto heaved a sigh and let his shoulders droop. He would have to try to talk it out of them later. For now, Makoto tried to clear his mind for the long shift he had ahead of him.

"I'm going on my break."

"Okay, Boss!"

Haru wiped off his hands and grabbed a clean bowl from the stack. He poured himself a serving of the mackerel soup and headed out of the kitchen and towards the break room. He glanced around the restaurant floor on his way and immediately spotted Tachibana taking an order from one of the tables. His smile was charming, making the customers swoon and laugh.

But Haru's eye twitched.

Tachibana's tie was crooked.

Why is there always something wrong with his uniform? Haru thought.

With a heavy, resigned sigh, Haru opened the door to the break room and entered, closing the door behind him. When he faced the room, he paused.

Tachibana's twin siblings were both at the long table near the lockers, sitting across from each other. The girl—Ran, if he remembered correctly—was angrily scribbling away in her notebook while the boy—Ren—was staring at a large, blank sheet of white paper.

Haru cleared his throat and made his way over to the table. The two of them glanced up at him as he sat down and Haru nodded towards them in greeting. They both nodded back at him, not

bothering to say hello, and then went back to angrily working on whatever they were doing. The tension was so thick that it could be cut with a knife.

Haru instead dipped his spoon and chopsticks into his bowl of soup, picking up a large piece of mackerel and slurping it into his mouth. He closed his eyes and savored the tasty flavor of the fish. Yes. Haru chose a good soup to make today.

It nearly cut all of the tension out of the air up until he heard a frustrated grunt from beside of him.

Haru's eyes snapped open and he glanced over to see Ren writing on the large paper. His face was scrunched up in concentration as his hand moved swiftly up the page. Haru could not quite see what he was doing but he recognized the familiar angle of Ren's hand and the pencil against the paper.

He was drawing.

Haru took another bite of his soup, carefully watching Ren out of the corner of his eye. Ren's hand would drag the pencil up, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth, and then he would stop, huffing out a frustrated sigh. He did it again: dragging the pencil up to a certain point on the page and then stopping, heaving out a more upset sigh than the last. It was fairly obvious that Ren was getting frustrated.

Suddenly, Ren dropped his pencil on the table and whined from his throat.

Haru turned his head completely at the noise and felt his heart skip. Ren's eyes were brimming with tears.

Haru swallowed his piece of fish and then glanced around the break room. There was not another adult soul in the room. He then glanced to Ran, but she was pointedly ignoring her brother's distressing cries.

Haru winced and glanced back at the door. Maybe Tachibana was free?

He slid his chair back, leaving behind his delicious soup, and headed to the door. He cracked the door open to peer out into the restaurant, hoping to snag Tachibana when he had a free moment.

But Tachibana was on the other side of the restaurant, tending to a large table.

Haru sighed and rubbed his face. He wanted to pull his hair out.

What was he supposed to do in this situation? Should he comfort him? Leave him alone?

A loud sniffle pulled Haru back to reality and he turned to see Ren back at it again, but this time, he was on a different page.

Haru took a deep breath. After everything that Tachibana had done for him, he could at least try to do this one thing. He carefully walked back to the table and stood behind Ren.

"What are you working on?" Haru asked, leaning forward to glance over the boy's shoulder.

Ren jumped at his voice and pulled the sketchpad to his chest, hiding the drawing from sight. He turned his head up to look at Haru with wide eyes.

"Nothing," Ren said in a small voice.

Haru almost pouted. He did not get to see what he had drawn.

From across the table, Ran groaned softly and rolled her eyes. Haru glanced at her and blinked, waiting for another response. When she remained quiet, Haru glanced back down at Ren, who was still clutching the white pad to his chest.

Haru sighed, ready to give up, but then his gaze wandered to the table. His eyes lit up when he noticed a short graphite pencil on the table. It had almost been sharpened down to a nub but he still recognized its smooth edges.

"Were you drawing?" Haru asked, glancing back to Ren.

Ren's hands clenched a little harder at the sketchpad and he bit his lip. He glanced down at the pad in his hands and nodded a little.

"I'm… in the art club," Ren explained.

"Can I see?" Haru asked softly.

A hint of fear flashed in Ren's eyes as he hesitated. He visibly gulped and then, surprisingly, he lowered the sketchpad down and onto the table.

Haru moved in a little closer and leaned over Ren's shoulder to get a closer look.

It was a rough sketch of a boy playing with a kitten.

Haru's eyes widened at how well it was drawn. The details of the kitten's ears and paws were very well done. Haru could even make out the texture of its fur, especially with the boy's fingers touching its back.

But Haru squinted when he noticed the boy. His back faced the viewer, leaving Haru unable to see any kind of facial expressions. It was obvious that the boy wanted to play with the kitten but Haru wanted to know what kind of face he was making.

"Why did you draw it from behind? Why not draw it from a side view to show what the boy looks like?" Haru asked.

Ren's shoulders rose up by his ears and he averted his eyes. His hands found each other in his lap and he fidgeted in his seat.

"I'm not good at drawing faces," Ren admitted quietly.

Haru hesitated and tilted his head. He pulled out the chair next to Ren and sat down gently.

"Why do you say that?" Haru asked.

Ren's eyes briefly met his before flitting back down to his sketchpad. He reached forward and grabbed it, flipping it a couple pages back. With red cheeks and evasive eyes, Ren handed the sketchpad over.

Haru grabbed the sketchpad and gazed at the picture drawn on the white paper. It was the same picture but from the angle that Haru had wanted: a side view. However, Haru could make out little mistakes in the boy's cheeks and nose. His smile seemed wobbly and his eye was lopsided. But, Haru could see that there was life in his eyes, and it made his heart beat a little heavier.

"This is pretty good," Haru said, looking back at Ren. "I can show you how to properly draw the faces, if you want."

Ren nervously looked up at him, looking hesitant and unsure.

"Really?" Ren asked.

Haru nodded and then pointed to the boy's cheek on the paper.

"This is a little thin. Since he's just a boy, you want to make it a little puffier so he looks younger. He hasn't quite matured, yet," Haru explained. He paused, twisting his lips, and then looked at Ren. "Do you have an eraser and another pencil?"

Ren's eyes widened comically and then his brows upturned sadly. He shook his head a little frantically and Haru worried that he would start crying. Haru lifted up a hand before Ren could spiral into hysterics.

"Don't worry about it," Haru said as he stood up.

He walked over to the lockers and opened up his own locker. He often kept his own art supplies on hand if he ever had free time. He grabbed his pouch of pencils and erasers and then walked back to the table. He unzipped his pouch and pulled out a bundle of fresh graphite pencils and a white eraser.

Ren's eyes blew wide at the sight, his jaw dropping. Haru sat back down next to him, laying down the pencils on the table, and then picked up the eraser. He gestured with the eraser towards Ren's drawing, asking for a silent permission.

"Can I?" Haru asked.

Ren, still looking shell-shocked, nodded mutely. Haru leaned over the sketchpad and carefully held the eraser in between his fingers, lightly pushing away the lead on the paper and blowing away the shavings. Then, he grabbed one of the pencils on the table and leaned towards Ren.

"You want to make sure that you keep your hand steady. Start with light strokes, like this," Haru said.

Haru started with soft lines on the paper, outlining the boy's cheek with swift precision. Ren looked on with astonishment, his eyes watching Haru's hand with silent concentration.

"There. Here, you try," Haru said, passing the sketchpad and pencil over to Ren.

Ren hesitated, his eyes like saucers. His hand slowly reached up to grab the pencil, his fingers gently cradling it. He turned the pencil over in his hand a few times to study it and then he lowered it down to the paper. He started to draw the lines just as Haru did, his wrist bent at the correct angle.

"Like… this?" Ren asked.

Haru blinked down at the paper and then pointed at the curve underneath the boy's jaw.

"Make this a little less defined. Make the lines curvy instead of straight."

Ren nodded and tried again, following Haru's instructions perfectly.

"Is this right?"

"Yes. Keep doing that. And maybe we can work on the eyes next."

"O-Okay."

"Here, you can have some of these pencils. It looks like this one has almost run out."

"Wha—r-really?!"

"Sure."

A long, loud sigh erupted from across the table, making Haru freeze. He glanced up to see Ran scowling, or maybe even pouting, at her twin brother.

"What a baby," Ran mumbled, barely audible.

Haru bit back a grimace, waiting for the waterworks to start, but when he glanced down at Ren, he seemed unfazed. Haru breathed out a sigh of relief, glad that he had not heard her comment.

So Haru went back to instructing Ren, keeping a close eye on the volatile girl sitting across the table.

The walk home from the restaurant that evening was starkly quiet. Normally, their older brother would chat with them on their walks home, but tonight, he walked by Ren's side with an unreadable look on his face. Ren assumed that he was exhausted after working for over twelve hours.

Ren glanced over to Ran but she was glaring down at the sidewalk, her feet stomping into the pavement with each step. He sighed heavily and turned his head back to stare at the ground sadly. He missed playing with Ran and hanging out with her like they used to, but lately, Ran would blow up at him over every little thing.

I wonder if it is because I cry too much… Ren thought sadly.

His hands gripped onto the straps of his backpack, hearing the threads stretch and rip.

"You okay, Ren?"

Ren snapped his head up to see his big brother staring down at him, his green eyes searching. Ren bit his lip, throwing a quick glance at Ran, and then nodded mutely.

He hoped to leave it there, not wanting to bother his older brother with his problems with their sister. Ren knew that his older brother was stressed, he could see it on his face. He also had a strange feeling that he had been hiding something. Why else would their brother take on another job?

Ren gulped. He hoped that Makoto had not found his stash of broken colored pencils shoved underneath his bed. He would feel incredibly guilty if that was the whole reason he got a second job.

Makoto did not seem convinced by his answer, though, and his brows upturned sadly.

"Are you sure?" Makoto asked. He glanced at Ran briefly before giving Ren a nervous smile. "You guys… seem to be upset with each other."

Ren bit his lip at the look his older brother was giving him.

It reminded him of the funeral last year…

Their brother's head was bandaged and his eyes were red and swollen, his brows upturned and creased. There were stress lines on his forehead and dark bags under his eyes.

And when he locked eyes with Ren during the funeral service, he gave one of the saddest smiles he had ever seen.

Makoto was starting to look like he did that day, and Ren did not want to see that look on his face ever again.

"It's fine," Ren said softly, lowering his gaze to focus on the walk home.

"O-Oh?" Makoto squeaked. "Is that so?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Ren could see Makoto turn his gaze back to the path, his smile still strained on his face. Ren felt another stab of guilt in his stomach.

"Just know that you guys can talk to me about anything. Okay?" Makoto asked, turning to look at each of the twins.

Ran's face finally softened and she nodded slowly. When Makoto's eyes reached Ren's, he quickly looked away and nodded. Makoto hummed thoughtfully at their responses, sounding a little more satisfied.

"Good. Now then, let's get home. It's another long day tomorrow."

Ren winced and gripped his backpack straps a little harder. He dreamed of a day where his brother no longer had *long days.*

"Order up for table 13!"

"Uh, yes!"

"Oi, drinks for table 19!"

"B-Be right there!"

"Hey, Tachibana! Watch where you're going!"

"S-S-Sorry!"

Makoto wiped the sweat off of his forehead, feeling his exhaustion taking over him. He grabbed the plates he needed, quickly placing them onto his tray and hurrying out of the kitchen to deliver them to the correct tables.

After his training with Nagisa and a week and a half of taking orders, he had finally memorized the entirety of the food menu and half of the drink options from the bar. He had gotten the hang of taking orders quickly and managing to call it out to the chefs in the back. But remembering which table numbers he was assigned to each night was a different struggle.

"Oi! Which one of you waiters is on table 19?! Their order is waiting!" one of the chefs barked.

Makoto turned white as a sheet and hurried back to grab a clean tray. He swallowed thickly as he stacked the plates on the tray. He bowed in apology to the chef and hurried out to table 19, giving his best smile.

"Sorry for the wait!" Makoto apologized as he set down the tray. He handed out the plates to the ladies at the table and then tucked the tray underneath his arm. "Is everything in order?" he asked lightly, hoping that he had gotten the orders right.

The ladies at the table glanced at their plates for a moment and then reached across the table to switch them with each other. Makoto paled, a frantic frown plaguing his face. He had switched up their plates by accident!

Then, the ladies giggled, waving their hands in the air in a casual fashion.

"Don't look so worried," one of them said. "You're doing a great job."

"Yep!" her friend chirped. "The orders are in their proper places now."

The third woman pouted slightly at her two friends. "Well, I think I should've stuck with what Mr. Waiter handed me. It looked really tasty!"

The three ladies giggled again and Makoto managed to sigh in slight relief. He bowed to them, hashing out another apology to them before fleeing back into the kitchen.

Once the swinging door shut behind him, he moved to the nearby wall and sagged against it, taking a moment to catch his breath. How did Nagisa keep his cheery attitude throughout his whole shift? Where did all that extra chirpy energy come from? He was so small!

"Take a break."

Makoto snapped his head up to see Nanase-san eyeing him from his station. He flipped over something in his pan with ease, not taking his eyes off of Makoto as he spoke.

"B-But, I still have tables to look after," Makoto said.

"You delivered all of their food, right?" Nanase asked.

Makoto stopped to think, trying to remember if all of his tables had food. When he realized that he had just delivered the last orders for his current tables, he nodded groggily.

Nanase nodded his chin towards the kitchen door. "Then go take a break. Get some water. Sit down."

Makoto sighed, feeling like a ton of bricks were lifted from his chest. He nodded and pushed himself off of the wall, turning to stack his tray on the counter.

"Thank you," Makoto thanked with a smile, and Nanase nodded in response.

Makoto walked out of the kitchen slowly to ease the pounding of his heart and to lessen the pain in his feet. He stopped at the door to the break room and put his hand on the door knob, pausing to take a deep breath.

Don't quit, Makoto told himself. *Just keep pushing through it.*

Sato was due to arrive in a few weeks to make sure he had a new apartment. Makoto gulped at the thought. He almost had enough for a deposit, but he still had to have the first month's rent, too. He hoped that he would be able to make it in time.

Maybe he would have to take out a loan.

Makoto shook his head to fling the thought away. He did not even want to go near something like that. He just wanted to find something that would suit his siblings' needs. They needed a better environment. They needed their own bedrooms. They needed…

"Wait, Ran! Don't! Nanase-san gave that to me!"

"Eh? Can't I use it, too?"

"W-Well, he… he gave it to *me,* though."

"Ugh! Are you seriously doing this right now?!"

Makoto groaned at the noises just beyond the door, letting his head fall forward to lightly bonk against the door.

They needed… *parents.*

Makoto steeled himself, straightening his back and putting on a firm look, and then opened the door.

"Hey, hey! What's going on in here?"

Haru sighed softly, feeling the strain on his neck from the long day. He placed his white chef's uniform in his locker and grabbed his bag, stuffing his things inside.

Tachibana had done a good job today, despite all the stress that had been placed on his shoulders. He was now working longer hours than any other employee at the restaurant besides Haru himself, and yet he still managed to come with a smile on his face that wooed every patron. Haru still remembered the strain on his face from the back. He was glad he forced him to take a break.

Haru closed his eyes and shut his locker closed with a soft click. He slung his bag over his shoulder and was about to leave the break room when something on the table caught his eye. It was something fairly large and square. Haru walked to the table and leaned over to get a closer look. His eyes widened a little when he realized what it was.

It was Ren's sketchpad.

Haru frowned. In the chaos of the day, Ren must have forgotten it. He did seem at odds with his twin sister. He must have been really frazzled to forget something like this.

Haru picked up the sketchpad and flipped it a few pages to see all of Ren's hard work. The first few pages were in color but after a while, they faded into black and white. He was truly talented and Haru wondered if Ren wanted to continue doing this after middle school.

He pursed his lips. He remembered drawing a lot in middle school to get through his lonely stages. Ren was probably missing this sketchpad right about now, especially since it was going into the weekend.

Without a second thought, Haru snatched up the sketchpad and headed to his office in the back. He opened up a few drawers and sorted through some files until he found Tachibana's records.

Address, address… ah, here it is. Hm… he doesn't live that far.

Haru glanced up at the clock in his office, hoping that it was not too late.

I hope he's still awake.

Haru wrote down the address on a scrap piece of paper and then left his office in a huff, flicking off his lights on the way out.

"Hey, I'm heading out," Haru called over to the manager who stood by the hosting station. The manager lifted a hand, bidding him a good night.

Haru started down the street at a brisk pace, snuggling his chin into his scarf when a wisp of cold air stroked his cheeks and nose. He held Ren's sketchpad under his arm, delicate enough to not wrinkle any of the pages but firm enough to keep the wind from ripping it from his grasp.

His patience was tested when he was stopped at every lonely crosswalk he came upon with no cars in sight and the wind had picked up even more.

I should've taken a cab, Haru thought with a twitch of his eyebrow.

After one more crossing, he walked down the darkened streets towards a residential area. Haru had not even realized that there were apartment buildings tucked away in this part of the district. When he came upon an older apartment complex, he glanced down at the paper with Tachibana's address on it and then back at the building.

This must be it.

Haru walked to the front doors of the complex, surprised that there was not any type of security or doorbells. He walked to the stairs and climbed up a few levels to the right floor.

This building seems old, Haru thought. *I wouldn't imagine that his parents would pick a place like this to live.*

When he reached the right door, Haru lifted his hand to knock, but suddenly paused.

Wait. Did he even live with his parents? Did he walk his siblings to his parent's house? Where did they even live?

Do they all live… together?

"N-Nanase-san?"

Haru snapped his head to the side, his hand still a few centimeters from the door, and saw his disheveled employee standing in the hallway with two plastic bags in his hands. He was still donned in his work uniform; his white shirt was untucked and unbuttoned, revealing a plain white t-shirt, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

Haru felt his brow twitch slightly. So that was how his sleeves always appeared wrinkled.

"What are you doing here?" Tachibana asked, his eyes with surprise.

Nanase paused, wondering to himself briefly why he had made the trek out to Tachibana's home in the first place. Then, he felt the sketchpad shift underneath his arm. He quickly grabbed it and lifted it up for Tachibana to see.

"Ren forgot his sketchpad in the break room at the restaurant," Haru explained.

Tachibana's face lit up, his jaw dropping and his eyes widening.

"Oh! You found it?" Tachibana said, staring at the sketchpad in Haru's grasp. "Oh, thank you very much, Nanase-san! Ren was so upset when he couldn't find it in his bag."

Tachibana's smile was bright and practically contagious. It did not matter how worn or exhausted he looked, he always managed to make others happy with his infectious smile and pleasant demeanor. It was no wonder he received such high praise from the food critic.

Haru snapped out of his daze, remembering that he still had not responded.

"It's no trouble," Haru said. He was about to hand over the sketchpad when he remembered that Tachibana's hands were full. He raised a brow and stared at the bags in his hands. "You… went shopping?"

Tachibana squeaked adorably and glanced down at the bags. His cheeks quickly reddened and his smile turned shy and wobbly.

"Well… this is… it's actually food for the twins for tomorrow," Tachibana explained. "I didn't have time to prepare anything for them tomorrow, and we didn't really have anything so..."

Haru blinked and squinted at the packaging, recognizing the convenient store logo on the side. He internally scowled at it as if it offended him.

"Oh! Uh, would you like to come in?" Tachibana asked, gesturing towards the door.

Haru paused, staring at his full hands, but then nodded. He reached over to grab one of the bags from Tachibana's hands.

"Ah, thank you, Nanase-san," Tachibana said as he pulled his keys from his pocket. He unlocked the door and led Haru inside.

"Pardon the intrusion…" Haru whispered upon entering. He stepped into the apartment and gently toed off his shoes.

Tachibana chuckled softly and rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to organize the shoes at the entryway.

"S-Sorry about the mess," Tachibana apologized, suddenly looking shy. "It's been… well, it's been a long week."

Haru glanced around the apartment, noting the small living room that led to a long hallway. There was only one couch with a small coffee table separating it from the television. Haru noticed the odd placement of a pillow and blanket on the couch but decided to tear his gaze away from it to focus back on Tachibana.

"It's not a mess," Haru assured. "You're fine."

Tachibana's smile was small but thankful. "Would you like some tea? I can make some."

Haru nodded and hummed. "Sure."

Tachibana's smile brightened and he nodded his head towards the dining room.

"Kitchen's this way," he directed.

He led Haru through the living room and into the dining room, flicking on the light. As soon as the light turned on, there was a soft groan that startled the both of them and they snapped their heads to

see a sleepy Ren sitting at the table with his head down.

"Ren?" Tachibana called.

The boy stirred, his face scrunching up at the harsh light. He slowly sat up from the table and rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"'Nii-chan?" Ren mumbled, his eyes slipping closed.

Tachibana quickly placed the bag in his hand on the kitchen counter and walked to Ren's side. Haru followed suit, walking over to the counter to place his bag down next to the other.

"What are you still doing up? You're supposed to be in bed," Tachibana said softly.

Ren blinked a few times until the fogginess cleared from his eyes and then he looked up at his brother. He hesitated, his mouth opening and closing a few times, and then his gaze lowered to stare at the table.

"W-Well, I was, but… Ran got mad at me 'cause…" Ren suddenly cut himself off, his mouth closing shut with a soft click. Haru could see how puffy and red his eyes were.

Tachibana hummed softly and then lifted a hand to card his fingers through Ren's hair.

"Did you guys fight again?" Tachibana asked so quietly that Haru almost did not catch it.

Ren stayed quiet, his shoulders hunching up by his ears, and his silence spoke volumes.

Tachibana ran his hand through his hair one last time and then leaned down to him.

"I think I know of something that will cheer you up," he said, and then he turned to look at Haru with a soft smile.

Ren glanced up at his brother and then followed his gaze until he made eye contact with Haru. His eyes widened a bit when he saw him.

"Nanase-san?" Ren asked, sporting the same confused expression as his older brother did earlier.

"Mmn," Tachibana hummed. "He has something for you."

Haru snapped out of his daze and then stepped forward, pulling the sketchpad out and handing it towards Ren. Ren's eyes were wide as saucers at the sight.

"You left it in the break room," Haru explained.

Ren's hands gently took the sketchpad and he stared at it with a bewildered expression on his face, as if afraid that it would disappear from his sight at any moment.

"Nanase-san came all the way here to deliver this to you, Ren," Tachibana explained.

Ren snapped his head up to look at Haru, his lip trembling a little. Then, he scrambled off of his chair and bowed deeply at the waist, his sketchpad clutched tightly to his chest.

"Th-Thank you so much!" Ren thanked, his voice a little loud.

Haru blinked down at him, overwhelmed with a feeling of déjà vu. Of course Ren would pick up on the same habits as his older brother. Kind, sensitive, and appreciative to a fault.

They were definitely brothers.

Haru glanced to Tachibana for help but he was wearing a fond smile on his face, not daring to intervene. Haru pursed his lips and glanced down at Ren.

"It's… no problem," Haru answered.

Tachibana chuckled softly and placed his hand on Ren's shoulder, forcing his back to straighten.

"Are you feeling better?" Tachibana asked him.

Ren glanced down at his sketchpad and then back up to his brother, nodding mutely. Haru could almost see some tears brimming in his eyes, but he was sure that they were happy tears.

"Good," Tachibana said. "Now, why don't you try going back to bed?"

Ren nodded furiously again. He faced Haru and gave him a quick bow before padding off down the hallway. Haru stared after him, surprised by the entire scene. Tachibana had just handled all of that with such ease. It was as if he had been doing it his entire life.

"Thank you for that," Tachibana said, pulling Haru out of his thoughts.

Haru turned back to watch as Tachibana walked over to the stove to start on some tea. He poured some water into the kettle and turned on the stove.

"But you really shouldn't have come all the way out here to do this at this time of night," Tachibana said with a slight frown.

Haru shrugged, turning his head to gaze around the small kitchen.

"It was no trouble," Haru said.

Tachibana's smile returned to his face. "Well, I'll make you some tea as thanks."

Haru managed a small smile at that. "That sounds good."

Tachibana finished pouring the rest of the water into the kettle and turned back towards the counter. He started pulling out some of the takeout boxes and opening them, separating them into each of the twins' bentos.

"Is that what you pack your siblings for lunches?" Haru asked, watching as Tachibana fumbled over his question.

"M-Mostly," Tachibana answered.

"Every day?"

Tachibana paused, his smile strained. He lifted up a hand to rub the back of his neck nervously. His pause made Haru's brows crease. It was obvious that the twins slept here and that Tachibana made all of their meals for them.

But where were their parents?

Something in Haru's gut churned nervously.

"Well, I mean… sometimes I cook meals for them," Tachibana said, his sentence sounding like

there was more.

Haru pressed gently. "But?"

Tachibana's smile tightened even more at Haru's persistence, his hand still rubbing the skin on the back of his neck raw.

"But I'm not great at cooking," Tachibana said. "Whatever I cook usually ends up burned or undercooked. I want to be able to make really good meals for the twins but I just can't seem to grasp how to cook and I don't have the time to learn and read the cookbooks and ingredients are expensive and—"

"I'll teach you," Haru interrupted, having heard enough of Tachibana's ramblings.

Tachibana looked at him with wide eyes and a dropped jaw, looking confused.

"What?" Tachibana asked.

"I'll teach you how to cook," Haru said. "I can teach you simple meals after you unload the truck in the mornings. There should be time before your first shift starts."

Tachibana looked completely dumbfounded. His hand dropped from his neck and instead started to flail them in front of his body.

"B-But won't that interfere with your work? You couldn't possibly sacrifice your time to—"

Haru lifted up a hand to stop him. "I'm offering," he said. "Don't worry about my time. I *want* to help."

Tachibana paused, his jaw sill dropped in surprise. Then, a fond smile appeared on his face and he tilted his head.

"Thank you, Nanase-san," Tachibana said warmly. "This… means a lot."

Haru glanced away briefly, feeling blinded by Tachibana's bright smile. He glanced back up at him and waved his hand in the air.

"It's no trouble," Haru said. "Besides…"

He glanced down at the bags from the convenient store and its contents that were placed to the side.

"No one should have to be reduced to eating *this*."

"Hey, I like convenient store food!"

"If it's not mackerel, then it's not good."

"What kind of logic is that?!"

"Did you make us lunch from one of Nanase-san's recipes?" Ren asked Makoto as they headed towards the school.

Makoto smiled down at him and nodded.

"I think his lessons are paying off," Makoto said.

"You've gotten better," Ran said quietly, a small smile on her face. "Your rice was still burned last week and Nanase-san taught you how to use a rice-cooker."

The smile might have been tiny but it felt like a huge victory for Makoto. His smile widened and punched her shoulder playfully.

"Hey, don't tease me!" Makoto said. "I've only been taking lessons from him for a week."

"It's more like a week and a half," Ran chirped.

"Close enough."

They reached the school gates and Makoto smiled lightly at them.

"I might have to start my second shift early today, so I might be a little late picking you up from your clubs," Makoto said. The twins blinked up at him and nodded. "Have a good day, okay?"

Ran and Ren paused, but then they broke out into small smiles. Makoto's heart fluttered at the sight.

Maybe they had made up with each other?

"Bye, Onii-chan!" Ren called, waving at him.

Makoto waved at them and watched them disappear into the school building. He took a deep breath and sighed happily.

This… could be a good day.

The final bell of the day rang and Ren sighed. He was in no mood to go to club today. It had already been a long day and… he just really did not want to see those upperclassmen.

He headed down to the lockers to grab his extra set of pencils, his hands shoved deep into his pockets and his eyes glued to the ground underneath his feet.

Maybe he should just skip today.

As soon as Ren turned the corner, he collided with someone's back, his nose bumping the other's shoulder. He rubbed his nose as the person turned around.

"Oh, sorry, I—"

Ren stopped when he was met with a familiar pair of teal eyes.

"R-Ran…" Ren whispered, stepping back.

She looked at him with an irritated expression. Ren could see some of her friends behind her back, staring at them with apprehension.

"What are you doing here?" Ran asked, sounding bored.

Ren shrunk a little, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"I'm here to get the special pencils that Nanase-san gave me," Ren said, brushing past Ran to get to

his locker.

Ren could hear her scoff but he continued down to his locker. He opened it and reached in to grab his bag, trying to ignore the footsteps that passed him.

"Oh? Going home already?"

Ren shuddered at the sound and whipped around, slamming his own back against the lockers. The three people he did not want to see today were standing in front of him with evil sneers on their faces.

"Not planning on skipping club today, are you?"

"We wouldn't want to miss our favorite crybaby!"

Tears immediately filled Ren's eyes and he ducked his head to try and hide them. The bullies in front of him started to snicker.

"So, *so* easy!"

"I can't believe it was that quick."

Ren felt his heart leap.

"What a baby."

"You are the one who can't defend yourself! Why don't you grow up?!"

Those words that Ran had so cruelly spat at him over the past few weeks began to gnaw on his bones. He had enough of this. He wanted this to *stop*.

He sniffed, curling his hands into tight fists, and the tilted his head back up to give his best defiant glare to the bullies.

"Whoa, what's this?"

"Oi, why're you making a face like that for, huh?"

The bullies' smiles faded, and the leader of the small group reached forward to grab a handful of Ren's shirt.

"Yeah. You're supposed to be crying."

Ren clawed at the upperclassman's hand, trying to break free, but the bully's grip was strong. He felt the tears brim in his eyes again and he whimpered, begging himself not to cry.

Don't cry, don't cry… Ren thought. *Whatever you do, don't—*

Suddenly, the hand on his shirt was gone, and the upperclassman was pushed back several feet.

"Leave him alone!"

Ren grimaced, wiping the tears and snot from his face. Of course Ran had to come to his rescue *again*. He heard Ran's friends on the far side of the lockers start whispering to each other nervously.

"I heard she has to do this a lot."

"Why doesn't he just defend himself? What a loser."

"She has such a dumb brother."

Ren grimaced, feeling himself shrink. He wanted to melt into the lockers and disappear. He should have never gotten out of bed today.

"Wow, you really *do* have a bodyguard," one of the upperclassmen sneered. He rubbed the back of his neck, looking bored. "This is getting real old."

"Yeah, yeah," the other two upperclassmen agreed. "Let's just go. Club is starting soon."

Ren watched them as they left, disappearing down into the hallway. He gazed back at Ran, watching as her shoulders slumped. Ren winced when she sighed. This was not how he wanted this day to go. He just wanted things to be reconciled. He did not want any of this!

When Ran turned around, her scowl was piercing.

"You done crying?" Ran spat, sticking her hands into her blazer pockets.

Ren flinched, reaching up to wipe his face again.

"I'm not crying," Ren mumbled.

"Hah? Yes, you are. Look at your face!" Ran said, her voice starting to rise in volume.

"I'm *done*. The *situation* is done. I'm not crying."

"Liar!" Ran yelled, making Ren jump.

"E-Eh?"

"You always cry at every little thing!" Ran shouted, throwing her arms in the air. "And all you get is more attention for it!"

"It's not like I *ask* for the attention!" Ren shouted back, letting his feelings slip through. "And I don't cry over every little thing."

"Yes, you *do!"* Ran yelled. "All you ever do is cry and then I have to come to your rescue. Don't you realize how embarrassing that is? To have a crybaby for a *brother?"*

"Huh? Why is that making you so mad?!" Ren asked.

"You even cried so Nanase-san can help you with your stupid drawings!" Ran yelled.

Ren's anger flared and he took a step forward towards his sister.

"They're not *stupid!"* he shouted. His heart was pounding against his chest. "Why are you always so mean to me?!"

"Mean?! Did you not see what just happened here? I saved your skin!*Again!"*

"I was going to *handle* it!"

"How? By crying all over them again?"

"I told you, I wasn't—"

"Don't you know how much it probably bothers Onii-chan?"

Ren flinched back at her question, his eyes widening. His chest fluttered with nervous energy as his limbs started to shake.

"What?"

"You always make him sad with your annoying crying!" Ran shouted. "I bet he doesn't even want you around anymore!"

Ren froze, feeling his chest *burn*. He felt his blood boil in his veins, his tight fists shaking with anger.

"Take it back."

"Tachibana-san, you have two tables ready."

"Ah, thank you, Rei! I'll get on it!"

"Tachibana! Orders are ready!"

"O-Oh, already? Um… coming!"

"Um, excuse me, sir. But this isn't what I ordered."

"O-Oh, my. I'm terribly sorry. I'll get you the correct order right away!"

"Waiter! I need another water!"

"Yes, sir. I will bring it out to you in just a moment."

"Waiter!"

"Excuse me!"

"Waiter, waiter, *waiter…"*

Makoto ducked into the kitchen and hid against the wall once again, taking some breaths. The shift had been long and exhausting, and the tables were filled up with high-maintenance customers. He really, *really* wanted to sleep.

Makoto rubbed his face and took another deep breath. He sighed and slumped against the wall a little.

Don't give in. You're doing this for Ran and Ren.

This is all so that Ren can be at peace and Ran can laugh and relax again. That's all I want for them.

His hand dropped from his eyes and he stared up at the ceiling of the kitchen.

Mom, Dad…

I just want us to be a family again.

Give me strength to continue.

And help Ran and Ren to mend their relationship.

With a renewed sense of peace, Makoto straightened from the wall. He recalled his siblings' small smiles from the morning when he had dropped them off. The thought made him feel light even with the heavy exhaustion.

He smiled.

He could not wait to be a peaceful family again.

"Take it back."

Ran's eyes widened at his tone. She stood still, blinking back at him with a defiant look on her face. Then, she folded her arms across her chest, her brows lowering into a glare.

"Make me," Ran challenged.

Ren felt his patience thin.

"I said," Ren said lowly, stepping forward and placing his hands on Ran's shoulders. "Take. It. Back."

Ren shoved his twin by her shoulders, making her fumble back on her feet towards the lockers. She managed to catch herself before she could lose her balance and she stared at Ren for a moment, her eyes wide with shock. Then, her face twisted into a snarl and she stomped over to Ren, grasping him by the shoulders and shoving him right back.

"*Make me!"* she echoed back, her voice echoing in the space.

Ren grunted as he stuttered back on his feet, gritting his teeth. He glared at her as his eyes started to brim with frustrated tears.

"What? Are you really going to cry again?" Ran shouted at him. "Are you serious? Why are you such… such a… a *crybaby?!"*

Oh, look the crybaby is doing what he does best.

Look! It's the crybaby's turn!

Crybaby!

Crybaby!

At hearing those words coming from his own sister's mouth, something in Ren snapped.

He charged forward and tackled Ran to the ground as angry tears sprung from his eyes. He pinned her to the ground and grabbed at her uniform, almost ripping the fabric of her blazer.

"Take it back!" Ren shrieked.

Ran's face shifted from surprise to anger as she reached up to yank at Ren's hair.

"No!" she shrieked back.

Ren cried out in pain and reached down to do the same to Ran, pulling on one of her pigtails until the barrette snapped and skidded across the hard floor.

Ran growled and lifted up her legs to kick Ren in the stomach *hard,* flinging him back. He fell backwards onto the floor and rolled onto his side, his hands holding his sore stomach, and Ran scrambled to her feet to jump on top of him, wailing her fists into his side.

Ren held his arms over his head to protect his face from Ran's punches. After a few more punches to his shoulder, he grunted, having enough, and snagged her wrist. He pulled her arm and forced her down to the ground, Ran landing on her side with a *thwack.*

Ren quickly got off of the ground to pounce again on his sister, scratching at her arms and reaching up to yank at the other pigtail on top of her head. Ran retaliated, flailing her fists in the air and towards Ren's face, managing to land a few hard punches to his jaw and nose.

At this point, a small crowd of junior high students had gathered, splitting into groups. Some of them were cheering, egging on the fighting, while others were standing there worriedly wondering if they should find a teacher.

"You stupid, stupid brother!" Ran screeched, swinging her fist in the air.

"I'm *not* stupid! *You're* stupid!" Ren yelled.

"Crybaby!"

"Jerk!"

"I *hate* you!"

Ren jerked, only for a moment, and then yanked on Ran's hair.

"I hate you *more!"*

"WHAT is going ON?!"

Ran and Ren froze, their fists still gripping each other's shirts and hair, and they snapped their heads up.

Their eyes widened.

"P-Principal?"

"Order for table 12, and 15!"

"Oi, Tachibana, those are your tables!"

"A-Ah, right! Coming!"

Makoto scrambled to pick up the orders for one table, hurrying to put them on his tray. He should really talk to Rei about assigning him the same table numbers each time so he would not get so confused.

Makoto quickly delivered the plates, setting them down at their respective tables. He bowed to the patrons with a smile and then tucked the tray under his arm. He turned towards the kitchen but stopped in his tracks when he saw a large group of people sitting down at one of the tables. It was

one of *his* tables.

Suddenly feeling overwhelmed, Makoto closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath.

You can do it, Makoto thought. *Do it for the new apartment. For Ran and Ren. You can do it.*

Makoto turned towards the kitchen, ready to grab more orders.

You can do it.

He opened his eyes.

You can—

"Oof!"

Suddenly, Makoto ran into something tall and sturdy, a pair of tan arms coming into view.

Had he just run into a customer?!

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I—"

Makoto froze, his eyes widening and jaw dropping in shock.

"S… *Sousuke?!"*

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Of anything you hold

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!
Sorry this is so late. My work schedule just got a whole lot busier! And next week, I'll be out of town with possibly no internet. Just wanted to let you guys know! Thank you for being patient :)
Keep checking in on my Tumblr for any updates on delays on chapters.

Thank you so, so, sooo much Tayu-chan for your help with this chapter. Seriously.
This chapter is dedicated to you, my friend.

Also, 200+ kudos??? Thank you guys for being so amazing!!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ran, we've already had this discussion and the answer is no."

"But—"

"End of discussion."

Ran felt her chest constrict as she slumped against the back seat of their car. She huffed and folded her arms across her chest, glaring at the driver's seat in front of her as her dad sat down and buckled in. Their mom sat in the passenger seat and Ren climbed into the seat behind her, a sheepish look on his face.

"Ran, don't make them mad…" Ren whispered as he buckled his seat.

The statement made her anger spike.

"But we haven't seen Onii-chan in months!" Ran said, turning to look at Ren with a look of betrayal.

"Ran," her mother warned softly, turning her head to look back at her.

"But it's true!" Ran pleaded, leaning forward to look at her parents. "We haven't seen Onii-chan in a while and all we want to do is see him as soon as we can! He's only here for the weekend and—"

"We know you're upset," her mother said, looking at her with a small frown. "But you guys are getting ready for middle school. You need all of the schooling you can get. You can't afford to miss classes."

Ran's brows upturned sadly and she sent a pleading look to her mother.

"But Ren and I have been studying for weeks. *We know the material. We really, really do!" Ran said. She looked back and forth between her parents. "Quiz me! I'll answer anything! And Ren! Quiz him, too!"*

"Eh?! Me?" Ren squeaked from his seat.

"We'll prove it to you!" Ran said, ignoring the distressing cries from her twin. "We'll prove that we're ready and—"

"Ran."

The sound of her father's cold voice cut her off immediately, stunning her into frozen silence. She turned her head to look at her father to see his eyes looking frustrated, yet calm. It made a shiver go down Ran's spine.

"I won't say it again," he said sharply. "Sit back and buckle up. Now."

Ran opened her mouth to protest but her father's furrowed brows made her snap her mouth shut. She sighed and sat back, pulling back her seatbelt across her chest and clicking it into place. Her eyes looked up and saw Ren sitting stiffly in his seat, his hands gripping his knees. His locked elbows were shaking and he had a few stray tears at the corner of his eyes.

"Sorry, Ren," their father suddenly said. Ran snapped her head to see her father lean back to pat his knee. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Ren sniffed and shook his head fiercely. Their father chuckled a bit and then started the car.

"Okay, let's get you guys to school," he said, and he pulled the car out to the road.

Ran sat back and glanced over to her brother, who was still sniffing slightly and avoiding everyone's gaze. She sighed and glanced down at the foot of the car, eyeing a stray piece of paper.

'This is unfair,' Ran thought as she toed the paper. 'So unfair.'

'This is so unfair.'

Ran toed at a stray piece of paper on the hallway floor, her lips pulled into a tight frown. She could feel her bottom lip swell and she sucked it into her mouth. She tasted blood on her tongue and winced at the sting. Her scalp also felt raw and itchy from all the tugging and pulling from earlier.

Her eye twitched at the thought. She cut her eyes at the person sitting on the bench next to her.

Except for his shaking shoulders, Ren sat eerily still next to her on the bench, his fingers gripping the edge tightly. His eyes were pulled down to stare the ground in between his feet and he sniffled every few moments.

Ran huffed and turned her head away, feeling anger creep up her back and making her arms quake.

Idiot. Crybaby. Stupid, she thought. *If you only hadn't started that crying then none of this would've happened.*

Her muscles clenched and her jaw set.

If only… I hadn't started that fight…

"Tachibana Ran, Ren."

Ran and Ren both snapped their heads up to see the door to the principal's office opened with a

teacher staring down at them.

"The principal will see you now."

"S-Sousuke?!"

Makoto eyed up and down the person standing in front of him, and it was definitely his best friend, *Sousuke*, standing in the middle of the restaurant during his shift with his arms folded across his chest and his usual scowl on his face.

Makoto had so many questions.

"What are you doing here?!" Makoto decided to ask first, seeing that it was the most pressing question.

"I'm here to check up on you," Sousuke answered with his a gruff.

His deep voice startled Makoto, and he realized that Sousuke was not an illusion. He was here in the flesh, standing right there! At close to three in the afternoon!

"H-How did you even find me?" Makoto asked, his eyes still wide from the shock.

Sousuke's lip pulled to the side and he gazed around the restaurant, his arms still folded tightly in front of his chest.

"Well, it took me a few tries until I finally found the right restaurant," Sousuke said. "I ended up getting off on the east side of town and I wasn't sure where I was. So I wandered around all morning until I got here."

"All morning?!"

Makoto could imagine it clearly. Sousuke at the train station, determined, proud… possibly angry. And then, as he takes a step into the crowd, he would stop.

"Where… am I?"

Makoto wanted to laugh at the image but his mind was still reeling at the fact that his best friend had showed up without warning after months without seeing each other.

What is going on? Did Makoto pass out?

As discreetly as he could, Makoto pinched his forearm and then flinched.

Nope. He was not dreaming.

So… what did Sousuke say earlier about the reason for his visit? Checking up?

"Um…" Makoto squeaked. "You said you wanted to check up on me?"

Sousuke's expression did not soften. If anything, his scowl deepened slightly as he took in Makoto's appearance, and Makoto wanted to sink through the floor.

"That's right."

Makoto grimaced, finally finding more of his voice and confidence.

"Why?!" Makoto asked. "You didn't need to come out here and—"

"Haven't you worked a full shift already?" Sousuke asked sharply.

"Eh?" Makoto sputtered. He glanced down at his attire, noting his waiter's uniform. "Well, yes, but I'm on my second shift." He glanced back up at Sousuke. "I'm a waiter now, too. Remember?"

Sousuke narrowed his eyes and Makoto flinched back slightly. Makoto knew that Sousuke often turned to anger as his coping method for when he was upset or protective, but that knowledge did not make it any less frightening. Sousuke looked like he had gained muscle since the last time they had seen each other.

"Yes, I remember you mentioning it," Sousuke snapped. "Why are you working yourself to death?"

"W-What?" Makoto stuttered.

"You heard me," Sousuke said.

Sousuke unfolded his arms and reached forward to grab at Makoto's tie, eliciting a strangled peep from Makoto.

"S-Sousuke, wait—"

"Why are you working so much? And in a place like *this?"* Sousuke asked, his eyes flitting around the restaurant.

"Um, well, my boss offered me the job a little while ago after helping me when I almost passed out —"

"Hah?!" Sousuke growled, gripping the tie harder and yanking him a step forward. Makoto squeaked again, stumbling on his feet. "Passed out?!"

Makoto shook his head fiercely. "No, no! I didn't actually pass out! I said *almost."*

Sousuke huffed impatiently. "Okay, then why in the world did you *almost* pass out?"

Makoto fidgeted and averted his eyes, trying to look anywhere except Sousuke's intimidating face.

"It… was because I had a bad headache that day, and—"

"A headache?"

Sousuke's voice was a little softer but much more intense than before. It sent a shiver down his spine, making him stiffen up.

"You've been getting headaches again?" Sousuke asked.

He pulled Makoto closer, his teal eyes flashing with a wicked stare. All of the color drained from Makoto's face.

"Since when did those start coming back?" Sousuke asked in a low growl.

Makoto opened and shut his mouth like a gaping fish, struggling for air. He tried to come up with an answer but his mind went completely blank.

"W-Well…" Makoto stuttered. "I…"

"Oi."

Makoto and Sousuke glanced over to see Nanase quickly approaching them with a vicious glare and fists by his sides. Makoto had never seen a look like that on his face before. How did he even see them arguing?!

"Ah, N-Nanase—"

"What are you doing to Tachibana?" Nanase interrupted, throwing his glare at Sousuke.

Makoto's heart jolted at Nanase's voice. It sounded a lot more antagonizing and threatening than usual. Makoto quickly put up his hands to try and make light of the situation and calm him.

"Ah, Nanase-san, this is just—"

"Hah? Who are you?" Sousuke spat. He let go of Makoto's tie and turned to give Nanase a harsh look.

Makoto whirled around to face Sousuke, his eyes wide with shock.

"S-Sousuke! What are you—"

"I'm Nanase Haruka. I'm Tachibana's boss. Who are *you?"* Nanase snapped, taking another step closer.

Was he just ignored?!

Makoto sputtered, looking between the two of them. His hands were still frozen in the air, desperately trying to calm the hot tension that was quickly building to an unsafe level.

"Yamazaki Sousuke. I'm Makoto's *best friend,"* Sousuke quipped, taking another step forward and folding his arms across his chest once again.

Makoto whined from his throat and glanced around, noticing that some of the customers were starting to stare at their display. He turned to face the two of them and grimaced when he saw them glaring daggers at each other dangerously.

"Um!" Makoto peeped, trying to get their attentions. "M-Maybe we should go somewhere and—"

Both Sousuke and Nanase turned their gazes towards him, their eyebrows low over their fierce eyes.

Makoto squeaked and shut his jaw, taking a step away from them. This situation was starting to get hostile. He knew that Sousuke was an abrasive and overprotective person but he never imagined that Nanase could be so aggressive, as well.

"N-Nanase-san, Sousuke… maybe we can continue this somewhere else?" Makoto pleaded, begging with wide eyes.

Sousuke and Nanase exchanged more glares before sharply turning their heads away from each other.

"Fine," Nanase huffed. "Let's go to my office."

"Hmph," Sousuke grunted, tilting his nose up to the ceiling.

Nanase's brows lowered over his flashing eyes and Makoto quickly stepped in between them.

This was bad.

"O-Okay, okay! Let's just go! We're causing a scene!" Makoto said in a loud whisper, his eyes darting around to see the shocked faces of the patrons. He turned back and was surprised to see that Nanase seemed unaffected by the customers.

Wasn't this *his* restaurant?!

"Fine," Nanase said.

"Fine," Sousuke echoed.

"*Fine,"* Nanase said more firmly.

Makoto groaned and slapped his hand over his eyes. If he ever had the desire to disappear, it would definitely be now.

They finally headed towards the back, passing by a few stunned waiters and busboys. Nanase pulled Nagisa aside along the way, just as he was tugging off his tie.

"Take care of Tachibana's tables," Nanase commanded.

"Eh?! I was just about to go home!" Nagisa whined.

"I'll pay you extra," Nanase said, walking by him without another word.

Makoto winced at Nanase's bluntness but that seemed to placate the tiny blonde as a huge smile formed on his face and he saluted, shouting out a chirpy "Aye, aye!"

Makoto wanted to thank Nagisa for his help, but he was suddenly dragged forward and through the doorway that led to Nanase's office. When he turned around, he saw Sousuke's hand letting go of his arm.

"So you're this *Nanase Haruka* I've heard so much about," Sousuke started, turning towards Nanase and folding his arms across his chest.

"That's right," Nanase answered.

"And you own this place?" Sousuke asked, jutting his chin vaguely towards the door.

Nanase's brow twitched and Makoto felt his insides squirm.

"Yes," Nanase answered.

"Hmph," Sousuke grunted. "What kind of lousy owner makes their employees work two jobs?"

"Sousuke!" Makoto gasped.

"I'm not forcing him," Nanase explained, his face frozen in a scowl. "He jumped in when I needed the help and asked if he could take on another job here."

"Then you're just an owner who makes poor decisions," Sousuke said.

"Sousuke, stop," Makoto pleaded.

Makoto grabbed his bicep, trying to force his way back into the conversation. But Sousuke brushed off his grip, his eyes not leaving Nanase.

"You should never let an employee work as much as he does," Sousuke said.

"It was his decision to make," Nanase said. He folded his arms across his chest and stared Sousuke down. "And you're disrupting his shift. You should leave."

Makoto turned his head to face Nanase, his eyes wide in a slight panic.

"Nanase-san, wait," Makoto tried.

"No," Sousuke said. "Not until you reduce his hours."

Makoto turned back to Sousuke. "Sousuke, he's right about—"

"No," Nanase answered back. "I don't have to listen to someone like you."

Makoto gasped and whirled around, lifting up his hands to Nanase.

Don't provoke him! Makoto pleaded, shaking his head back and forth. *He's going to get so, so angry—*

"*Hah?"* Sousuke spat, walking closer to get right in Nanase's space. "You really think you can just control someone's life like this?"

"I'm controlling nothing. It's his decision to work more," Nanase said.

"But you shouldn't let him! Makoto can't handle this much!"

"You underestimate him."

"Like *hell* I do!"

Makoto groaned, rubbing a hand down his face. This was getting too out of hand. His mind was still spinning over the fact that Sousuke was *here*, right next to him. How was he even here in the first place? He was still training with the national team, right? What happened with that?

Makoto sighed, deciding to put his endless questions to the side. For now, he had to cool down the heated discussion happening in front of his very eyes.

He was about to make another futile attempt to force the two of them apart but a harsh buzzing from his pocket halted his steps.

My phone? I must've forgotten to put it back when I changed for my second shift, he thought.

He glanced up at Sousuke and Nanase, who were still going at it, and sighed, considering ignoring whatever phone call he was getting this time. But when the phone kept ringing, a nervous flutter tickled his stomach. He quickly pulled out his phone and his heart jolted at the name on the screen.

Ran and Ren's school?

His chest sunk in a panic and he scrambled to answer it.

"H-Hello?"

"Ah, yes, is this Tachibana Makoto, the guardian of Tachibana Ran and Ren?"

Makoto's chest tightened and it suddenly became hard to breathe. What was wrong? Why was the school calling him? Did they get hurt?

Makoto swallowed. "Uh, yes. I am."

The woman on the other line hummed in response.

"I see. We're going to need you to come to the school immediately to meet with the principal."

Makoto's breath hitched, loud enough for both Sousuke and Nanase to stop their bickering and turn towards him.

"What?" Makoto asked. "What happened? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, they seem to be fine. But it seems there has been a situation."

Makoto quirked a brow. "Situation?"

"Yes. I'm going to need you to come and meet with the principal immediately."

Makoto chewed on his lip and bowed his head a little.

"Um… I'm still at work, though," Makoto said softly.

"Well, a legal guardian needs to come and pick them up immediately. Thank you."

Then, the woman hung up, leaving Makoto to stare down at his phone with creased brows and wide eyes.

A situation? What in the world could that mean?

"What is it, Makoto?"

"Are you okay?"

Makoto glanced up to see both Nanase and Sousuke staring at him, their faces soft with worry. He stared at them with creased brows, his arms beginning to shake.

"Ran and Ren's school just called. They… want me to meet with their principal," Makoto explained. He glanced down at his phone. "They want me to come. Now."

"What happened?" Sousuke asked him, his brow furrowing.

Makoto shook his head. "I… I don't know. They said there was a situation and I have to go to the school."

He looked to Nanase with pleading eyes. He did not want to leave during his shift but…

Ran and Ren… they needed him.

"Nanase-san, I…" Makoto started, unsure of how to even ask.

Makoto glanced down at the ground, his hand gripping in his phone. He had just started this job not too long ago and he was already asking for favors? He felt as if he was taking advantage of Nanase's kindness.

"I'll go."

Makoto quickly looked back up to see Sousuke standing with a determined look on his face, the anger melted away and replaced by genuine concern.

"What?" Makoto asked.

"I'll go handle this situation at the school," Sousuke said. "Just tell me where it is and I'll go and pick them up and take them back to your place."

Makoto stood stunned for a moment, his feet unwilling to move and his mouth unable to speak.

"I…"

"And before you freak out, I have your address typed into your contact in my phone. I can just call a cab and—"

"NO!" Makoto shouted, reaching out to grab Sousuke's arms, stunning both him and Nanase. He felt a hot blush rise on his cheeks and neck at the sudden realization of his loud voice. "I-I mean… please, Sousuke. Don't let them get into a car. *Please*."

Sousuke blinked a few times, barely even breathing, and then he patted Makoto's arms. Makoto jumped, realizing his tight grip on Sousuke's biceps, and then loosened his hold, looking shamefully down at the ground.

"All right. I'll walk them home," Sousuke said, giving Makoto's arms a squeeze.

Makoto felt his heart sink. He trusted Sousuke with his life and had no doubts that he could protect his siblings. But he could not help but feel worried and paranoid. He slowly let go of Sousuke's arms and then nodded.

"It'll be fine. I'll text you when we get back to your place and everything. I promise," Sousuke said, placing a hand on Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto nodded in response. "Okay," he agreed.

Sousuke nodded and then started to push Makoto out the door.

"Now, show me how to get to their school," Sousuke said, guiding Makoto towards the door to Nanase's office.

"Eh? O-Oh, it's really close and easy to get to. I can draw you a map," Makoto said with a small smile.

Sousuke pouted and gave Makoto another push. "I won't need that. Just tell me how to get there."

Just before they reached the door, Sousuke stopped, turning his head over his shoulder to sent a chilling glare in Nanase's direction.

"This conversation isn't over," he grumbled.

Nanase blinked at him and then his brows lowered in an intense glare of his own.

"I'll be waiting."

"Don't cry, Ren. Don't cry."

Ran's eyes fluttered open at the sound of someone crying, wailing almost. The blurry room cleared, revealing the small hospital room. Had she been asleep? How long?

"O-Onii-ch… chan…"

Ran sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and then glanced over to the hospital bed. Her eyes widened when she saw Ren's face buried into their older brother's chest. Ren was sobbing uncontrollably while Makoto had a small smile on his face.

"It's okay, Ren. It's okay. Don't cry," Makoto was saying.

Ran bit her lip, taking in Makoto's battered body. There were so many bandages and bruises covering him but he still smiled.

How could he possibly smile at a time like this? When he was hurt? When he had gotten into an accident?

"Ah… Ran."

Ran snapped her head up to see her older brother staring at her with tired eyes but a smile on his face. He reached out his free hand to her, beckoning her to come to his side. She hesitantly stood up from the couch in the room and walked over to his bedside, allowing Makoto to pull her close.

"I missed you, Ran," Makoto said.

Ran winced and pushed her face into his chest, not daring to say a word. She just wanted this nightmare to be over.

"M… Makoto."

Ran jumped when she heard Sousuke's voice boom in the small room. She glanced over at him, her breath hitching when she saw the look on his face.

He looked… scared.

"We…" Sousuke paused, looking down at Ran and then turning back to make eye contact with Makoto. "There's… something we need to talk about."

"Oi, shrimps."

Ran jumped and blinked rapidly, the memories fading from her very eyes. She glanced up to see a familiar figure stomping towards them. His booming voice bounced off of the school walls.

"Eh? Sousuke-nii-chan…" Ren mumbled as he got closer.

Eh? Sousuke-nii is here, too? Ran thought as she watched Sousuke step up to their bench.

He stared down at them with a wild expression at first, and then he frowned, his hands curling into fists. Ran gulped, wondering what he was so upset about. That was when she noticed her tattered clothes and dirt smudges on her hands.

Right, Ran thought. *We probably look like a giant mess.*

"Care to explain yourselves?" Sousuke suddenly asked, making both of the twins turn their gazes up to look at him.

Sousuke's arms were folded across his chest and he had a scowl on his face. But with the crease in between his brows and his harsh frown, he looked angrier than usual.

Ran swallowed thickly.

She opened her mouth to speak, ready to apologize or explain, when the door next to the bench swung open and a woman appeared in front of them. She had a clipboard in her hands with several papers attached by the metal clip.

"Oh. Are you Tachibana-san?" she asked, peering at Sousuke.

Sousuke looked back and forth between the two of them and the woman and then scratched the back of his head.

"No. He couldn't get off work. But I'm their emergency contact, Yamazaki Sousuke," Sousuke said.

The woman paused, looking down at her clipboard and flipping a few pages. She glanced back and forth from the papers to Sousuke, eyeing him with upmost scrutiny, and then she nodded.

"All right. The principal will see you all now," the woman said, holding open the door for them.

Sousuke glanced down at Ran and Ren and gave a questioning look, and it was a question that Ran did not know how to answer.

Ran and Ren hopped off of the bench and followed Sousuke through the doorway. Ran felt her pulse quicken as she entered. She had never set foot in the principal's office before. She was never one to be in this sort of situation.

The woman led the three of them into the principal's office where the man himself was sitting behind his desk with a steaming cup in his hands. He gestured towards the chairs that sat in front of his desk and they all sat down, Ran sitting stiffly in between Sousuke and Ren.

"So, you are not Tachibana-san, correct?" the principal asked, directing his gaze towards Sousuke.

"No. I'm their emergency contact. Their older brother was still at work," Sousuke explained, and Ran noticed a slight bitterness in his voice.

The principal tapped his fingers against the sides of the cup and hummed thoughtfully.

"I see," he said, and he took another sip. "Well, I'm sorry to have to bring you here on such short notice, but this was an urgent matter."

Placing his steaming cup down to the side, he then rested his clasped hands down on his desk and looked at Ran and Ren with a firm yet disappointed stare.

"I caught these two in a full-fledged fist fight on school grounds today."

Sousuke gasped, turning to look at the two of them. Ran stared at her hands in her lap, wanting to avoid his painful gaze. He eventually looked back up at the principal, his brows more furrowed than before.

"Fighting?" Sousuke asked.

"Yes," the principal said. "I needed you to come to take them home immediately."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ran could see Sousuke turn to look down at her again and she grit her teeth, sinking down in her seat. Her hands gripped the edge of her chair and she bit her tongue to prevent herself from saying anything to make the situation worse.

"Not only that, but we have to discuss the consequences," the principal suddenly said.

Ran snapped her head back up, the anger replaced with a fear that quivered inside of her chest.

"Consequences?" Sousuke repeated.

"Yes," the principal answered. "While they have a spotless record, I can't let this sort of thing slide. Especially since there were several other students to witness their behavior on school grounds."

Ran winced at that. She remembered seeing all of the other faces of her peers as they gathered and watched their stupid fight.

Her nails scraped the bottom of her seat.

But Ren was the one who started it, Ran thought bitterly.

"So, I have no choice but to suspend both of them for two days."

The twins' eyes widened, eliciting small gasps from their mouths. Ran felt her gut clench uncomfortably and she bit her lip hard.

"Suspended?" Sousuke echoed.

Ran snapped her head to see Sousuke staring at the principal with a shocked look on his face, his balled fists tight in his lap.

"I'm sorry. I know these two are usually model students here, but I cannot make exceptions," the principal said.

Ran watched as Sousuke clicked his tongue and then sighed, closing his eyes. Ran's heart leapt painfully in her chest, fearful that she had just disappointed Sousuke.

"I understand," Sousuke said softly.

Ran's eyes widened, her hands curling back into fists on her lap.

No way… I'm actually being… suspended?!

She grit her teeth, unsure if she wanted to cry or punch something.

"I'll ask that you go ahead and take them home now. It's been quite the afternoon," the principal said.

Sousuke hummed and then bowed his head slightly to the principal.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Sousuke apologized quietly.

The principal let out an amused hum and waved his hand in the air.

"Just see to it that it doesn't happen again," he said.

Sousuke hummed, raising his head back up to meet the principal's eyes.

"I'll make sure of that," he said, and then he turned to Ran and Ren with a threatening look on his face, making the both of them jump. "Let's go," Sousuke said stiffly, standing to his feet.

Ran paused, waiting until both Sousuke and Ren stood up before she hopped off of her own chair. Ren headed out the door to the office and Ran followed suit, passing by Sousuke on the way. She took a few steps outside the door but froze when she heard the principal speak again.

"Ah, there's one more thing," the principal said, stopping Sousuke in his tracks.

Ran looked back to see Sousuke turning around to face the principal once again. The principal's friendly smile was gone, replaced by a solemn and grim expression.

"You do realize that I must inform Social Services about this incident, yes?" the principal asked.

Ran's heart skipped a beat and then proceeded to pound faster against her ribcage. She heard a strangled noise come from Sousuke's throat as his shoulders jumped. His arms were stiff by his sides as he processed his words.

"Social Services?" Sousuke echoed.

The principal nodded, standing to his feet. "I am under obligation to inform Social Services of any changes in their behavior at school or if I notice anything strange with their older brother."

Ran's breath hitched, her hands gripping the sides of her skirt.

Strange? Onii-chan hasn't acted strange! Ran thought. She bit her lip. *Right…?*

"Um. If you don't mind my asking, what do you consider strange about their older brother?" Sousuke suddenly asked, pulling Ran from her thoughts. She glanced back up to see Sousuke standing with his hands folded across his chest again.

"Well, I'm afraid that I must inform them of his absence during this meeting," the principal said.

"And what will happen then?" Sousuke asked stiffly. "Is Makoto going to be in trouble?"

The principal paused, his brow lowering a fraction over his eye. Ran, at first, thought he looked irritated, but when the principal sighed, Ran realized her initial observation was wrong.

He looked concerned.

"I am not sure," the principal said softly. "I just know that Social Services never takes any situation lightly. It is quite possible that Tachibana-san is walking on thin ice. I would advise him to be cautious."

Ran held her breath when she saw Sousuke unfold his arms and lower them to his sides. Sousuke then paused, his head tilted towards the ground and his hands clenching and unclenching nervously.

"I see," Sousuke said. "I will… I will let him know."

The principal nodded, the pleasant smile back on his face.

"Have a good day, young man," the principal wished.

"Mmn," Sousuke hummed. "Thank you."

Ran jumped as she watched Sousuke turn back around with an unreadable expression on his face, and then he walked past her without another word. She felt shivers shoot down her spine at the breeze he created.

Sousuke-nii didn't look angry, Ran thought. *He almost looked… scared.*

Sousuke's hands were curled into tight fists as he led the twins out of the school and across the street towards the restaurant. He debated just taking them back to Makoto, but after seeing their ruffled clothes and nasty scrapes and bruises, Sousuke decided against it.

That worried look on Makoto's face…

"NO!"

"Please, Sousuke. Don't let them get into a car. Please."

Sousuke wanted to keep Makoto at ease for as much as he possibly could. He did not need this hanging over his head while he has to work. He was probably already stressing out and making mistakes all over the place.

Sousuke grimaced. He hoped he would not get fired today.

He glanced down to peer at the twins walking next to him. Ren had tears in his eyes and he was curved in on himself, as if trying to make himself small. He was sniffling lightly, wincing whenever his nose ached.

Yep, Sousuke thought. *Definitely Makoto's brother.*

Then, Sousuke's eyes flitted over to Ran. Her eyes were boring holes into the ground and her hands were in tight fists. Her emotions were well written on her face as she stomped her feet into the pavement.

Sousuke felt his chest flutter at the familiar expression. He recognized the look in her eye, the pain in her jaw as she ground her teeth. He was all-too aware of what she was feeling.

She's feeling exactly how I used to feel, Sousuke thought.

He faced forward again, his jaw set and fists tight by his sides. There was also the matter of what the principal had said.

"It is quite possible that Tachibana-san is walking on thin ice. I would advise him to be cautious."

Sousuke felt his eye twitch and his stomach twist.

What the hell did you mean by that? Sousuke asked himself. *Is Makoto in trouble or not?*

"Sousuke-nii-chan…"

Sousuke felt a tug on his sleeve and he jolted out of his thoughts, turning his head to peer down at Ren. He had a concerned look on his face.

"What is it, Ren?" Sousuke asked.

"Um…" Ren paused, biting his lip and looking down the sidewalk. "We're going the wrong way."

Sousuke's eyes blew wide and he snapped up to find himself in the middle of a busy sidewalk. They stood at an intersection, waiting for the crossing light to change to white.

Where… where the hell are we? Sousuke thought.

"Um… we remember the way back. Right, Ran?" Ren asked quietly.

Ran cut her eyes at him and looked away, refusing to answer, and Ren flinched and glanced down at the ground with wobbling lips. He sniffed loudly, a tear or two falling from his eyes, and then he glanced back up at Sousuke. His hand tugged harder at his sleeve.

"It… it's this way," Ren whimpered.

Sousuke winced. Ren's face was a mess.

"All right, all right. Lead the way. But you're not allowed to tell your brother about this," Sousuke said.

Ren sniffed again and nodded, moving closer to Sousuke and pointing him down the correct paths. Sousuke grumbled at each wrong turn he made.

After a few more turns and crosswalks, they finally reached the apartment complex. Sousuke's eye twitched at the sight.

This was where he had been living when he was in school? Sousuke thought to himself.

They headed inside and ascended the stairs up to the correct floor, heading straight for a door at the end of the hall.

Ran huffed and took out a key from her bag, jamming it into the lock and thrusting the door open with a heavy swing. When they were inside, Ran kicked off her shoes and stomped down the hallway. Sousuke heard a few more steps followed by a loud slam, making Ren flinch.

Sousuke sighed, shaking his head.

That girl needs to keep that anger in check, Sousuke thought. *Or it could destroy her.*

He glanced down at Ren, seeing that he was still shaken, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Go get cleaned up," Sousuke said. "I'll get started on dinner."

Ren nodded glumly and then headed down the same hallway towards the bathroom. There was a light click of the door shutting behind him, much softer than Ran's slam.

Sousuke sighed and ran a hand down his face in frustration.

What in the world happened to you two?

It was a sea of black.

Ran glanced around the room, seeing both a combination of familiar faces and unfamiliar faces. She recognized her aunts and uncles and some people that came over to the house occasionally, but she did not recognize many of the others.

There was someone speaking at the front of the room, rambling on and on about life and its precious moments… or something. Ran was not really sure what exactly he was saying. She was too preoccupied in her thoughts to concentrate on what some man was saying about her parents. He never even knew them, did he? She had never seen the man before today.

Ran glanced over to her brothers who sat next to her.

Makoto had a white bandage wrapped around his head, making his hair stick out at awkward places. He had bags under his eyes and his shoulders were slumped. He did not cry, however, but kept a blank look on his face.

Ran thought he looked strange as he sat there unmoving, expressionless and dead. Maybe he was just tired from the accident.

The accident...

Ran's hands twitched on her lap, her stomach twisting like a wet rag. It was excruciating and foreign, a pain that she could not place or decipher.

Then, a soft sniffle broke her out of her thoughts and she turned her head to the source of the sound.

Ren had tears pouring down his cheeks. His eyes were squeezed tight and his chest started to hiccup as he tried to smother the harsh sobs that clawed up his throat.

Ran swallowed, feel some discomfort swirling in her chest. Ren cried at the drop of a hat and it always seemed to sway the people around him. It even happened at dinner when he did not get enough food and Makoto would give him his portion.

She was about to lean over to tell him to calm down when she saw makoto turn to look down at him. She watched as Makoto placed a hand on Ren's shoulder, making him jump and whip his head up to look at his older brother. Makoto gave Ren a small, understanding smile and Rens lip quivered even more. He choked back another sob as he leaned forward to bury his face into Makoto's chest, and Makoto wrapped his arms around him.

And then—something that made Ran's eyes widen—Makoto's smile fell from his lips and his face twisted into a pained expression.

She felt a flame ignite in her chest, sending shivers up her spine and to the back of her neck.

Ren was being comforted and pitied, using his tears to get their older brother's attention once again.

'Seriously? Here?' Ran thought.

The anger flickered and then grew into blaze inside her chest.

'What a… a… crybaby.'

"Ran, come out of your room. Dinner is ready!"

The gruff voice sounding from down the hall made Ran groan and roll over, pushing her face into her pillow. Her backpack laid abandoned at the end of her bed, untouched. She had hardly moved

since they arrived home that afternoon. She had only gotten up to clean up her face and change her clothes. And even after that, she chose to plop down on her bed and mope until the inexplicable anger dissipated from her chest.

It did not work.

The anger was still there like burning embers on a bed of hot coals.

"Ran!" Sousuke called again.

Ran groaned and rolled her eyes.

She hopped off of her bed and headed out of their bedroom towards the kitchen. When she entered, she noticed Ren already sitting at the table, his sketchpad on his lap. When they locked eyes, Ren squeaked and glanced down at the sketchpad in his hands. Ran sighed and shook her head, stomping towards the table and plopping down across from him.

"At least you got changed," Sousuke said from behind, resting a plate down in front of her. "Did you do any homework?"

Ran glanced up at him and pouted. She wanted nothing to do with school at the moment.

At the lack of Ran's response, Sousuke sighed and placed his hands on his hips.

"You're going to miss two whole days of school. You should get ahead while you can," Sousuke said softly.

Ran clenched her teeth so tightly that her jaw started to ache. "What are you even doing here, Sousuke-nii-chan?"

"I came to check up on things," Sousuke explained. He glanced over to Ren, who had not even touched his food. "And by the looks of it, I came at a good time."

Ren ducked his head and Ran squirmed in her seat, feeling the burning frustration flicker in her chest.

"What's going on? Why did you guys even fight in the first place?" Sousuke asked. "You're making your older brother worry."

Ran snapped her head up at Sousuke, feeling a pain in her chest at the choice of his words. She opened her mouth to speak, her tongue burning to lash out, itching to insult.

But then, they heard the front door open, and Ran's mouth clicked shut.

"Ran? Ren? Sousuke?"

"Speak of the devil…" Sousuke mumbled, wiping his hands. "In the kitchen!" he called out.

Ran heard footsteps hurrying through the apartment until a mess of brown hair came into view. Her older brother appeared through the doorway with his work clothes wrinkled and his tie loose around his neck.

"Are you… off early?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto huffed, looking exhausted and worn.

"Ah, mmn," he hummed as he walked into the kitchen "Nanase-san sent me home because I was making too many mistakes and…"

Makoto stopped short when his eyes landed on Ran and Ren. His jaw dropped and he sucked in a sharp breath.

"Ran?! Ren?!"

Makoto hurried to them and his eyes blew wide. With one hand, he reached up to cup Ren's face to look at his swollen eye. And with his other hand, he reached up and brushed the scratches on Ran's cheek. He had a shocked look on his face as he assessed their injuries, which Ran just realized actually hurt.

"What *happened?"* Makoto asked, looking at them both.

Ran snapped her jaw shut, her voice refusing to speak. She glanced away from Makoto and stared off to the side.

To see her older brother with that same hurt look on his face…

With his sad eyes and quivering jaw…

It was too much.

The pain was too much for her to handle.

"W-We…" Ren said through a few hiccups.

Another spark of anger ripped through Ran's chest and she cut her eyes at him.

Don't! Ran wanted to yell. *You're going to make Onii-chan more upset!*

"They got into a fight," Sousuke explained.

Makoto gasped and whipped his head to the side, looking at Sousuke with wide eyes.

"Fighting? Each *other?"* Makoto asked.

Sousuke nodded once and Makoto turned back to look at the two of them.

"They're going to be suspended for two days," Sousuke said, adding insult to injury.

When Makoto gasped again, Ran winced and looked down at the ground, not wanting to see the pain on her older brother's face.

"*S-Suspended?!"* Makoto shrieked. "But… why?"

Ran peered up at her older brother, taking in the sadness and confusion in his eyes. His lips were twisted and his brows lowered painfully over his foggy eyes.

"Why would you guys try to hurt each other? *Why?"* Makoto asked, *begged.*

The hurt in those eyes…

Caused by so much pain…

All because…

"We… we didn't mean to."

Ran jolted, her eyes cutting over to see Ren trembling across the table. He was staring hard at his lap.

"I… well, I think that we were just angry. And, well… I…"

He kept mumbling, the noise grating on Ran's ears.

Was he really about to blame himself? Take all of the blame?

"I… was the one who…"

Well, fine then.

If he wanted to take the blame, then Ran was going to let him.

"Ren started it," Ran snapped, turning her eyes up to Makoto.

Makoto's eyes widened in shock and then he looked at Ren.

"What?" Makoto asked. "Ren? You started the—"

"He pushed me first," Ran continued, folding her arms across her chest. "So *he* started it."

"Ran!" Ren protested, tears springing from his eyes.

"What?" Ran snapped. "You were going to admit it, weren't you?"

"Huh? N-No, I was going to explain that—"

"That what? You got mad at me for stupid reasons and decided to tackle me?!" Ran yelled.

She stood up from her seat, the chair screeching backwards on the floor and nearly knocking over. She slammed her palms on the table, making the plates and cups rattle.

"This is *your* fault!" Ran yelled. "It was *your* fault that the fight started and that we're suspended now! Don't you get it?! You big, dumb, *crybaby*—"

"*Ran!"*

Ran jolted, finally seeing the tears that were pouring down her twin brother's cheeks. He was trembling from head to toe with his eyes squeezed shut.

Ran's eyes widened, her heart rising to sit uncomfortably in her throat.

Did she really just scream all of that?

After a sharp inhalation of air, Ren turned to Makoto and broke down into hiccups.

"O-Onii-chan, I… I'm *sorry,"* Ren apologized wetly.

Makoto was by his side in an instant, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and holding him tightly.

"It's okay, Ren," Makoto said. "It's okay. Don't cry."

Ran felt her chest seize as tingles spread down her arms and legs. The hair on the back of her neck stood and her arms began to shake. She wanted to scream, shout, lash out…

Cry.

Ran whirled around in the kitchen and stomped off to her room, ignoring the shouts coming from the dining room table. She made it to her bedroom and slammed the door shut behind her. She walked over to her bed and sat down on the floor in front of it, pulling her knees to her chest and biting her lip hard.

Why was it so easy for Ren to just cry like that?

It never made sense to Ran.

Never.

"Ran, can I speak to you for a moment?"

Ran looked up from her book to see her mother standing in the doorway of her bedroom. She put her book down and sat up on her bed, eyeing her mom carefully.

"Sure, Mom. What is it?" Ran asked.

Her mom came in and sat down on her bed with her, reaching up to pat her head.

"It's about your brother," she said.

"Onii-chan?" Ran asked.

Her mother smiled and huffed, amused. "Him, too. But it's mostly about Ren."

"What's wrong with Ren?" Ran asked.

"Mmm… he's been having a hard time with your brother gone to school. Have you noticed that?" her mother asked.

Ran bit her lip and nodded. "He's been crying a lot lately."

Her mother nodded and hummed, her eyes falling slightly.

"Yes, he has. So your dad and I need your help," her mother said.

"Oh? How can I help?" Ran asked, sitting up more.

"Can you help protect him when he needs it, even when he cries?" her mother asked.

"Eh? But what if he cries too much?" Ran asked.

"He doesn't mean to cry so much, Ran. It's just how his body reacts to stress right now. He can't help it," her mother said.

"Oh," Ran said.

"So, you think you can help me out?" her mother asked with a smile. "Can you be there for Ren?"

Ran's smile was wide and she nodded, determined.

"Yes!"

A few soft knocks pulled Ran from her thoughts and she looked up at the door.

"I'm coming in."

Ran winced, looking down at the ground in front of her socked feet. She heard footsteps approach but she did not look up.

"Yo."

Ran bit her lip as she heard Sousuke's voice from above. When she did not respond, he ended up plopping down next to her on the floor.

"Your big brother has Ren calmed down, for the most part. They're almost done watching a movie," Sousuke said.

Ran turned her head away, feeling drained of this conversation already. She was in no mood to be scolded or have any sort of life talk from Sousuke.

"You should come join us. You've been cooped up in here all night. I can heat up your dinner," Sousuke said.

Ran bowed her head further until her forehead touched her knees. It was a silent 'no' that she hoped Sousuke would understand.

"You know… I came here to spend time with you guys because I had the sneaking suspicion that something was wrong," Sousuke said, slouching his back against Ran's bed. "And it seems that I was right."

Ran sighed against her thighs, turning her face away from Sousuke. She hated when he was right.

"Did you know that everyone expresses pain in different ways?" Sousuke asked.

Ran's heart fluttered in her chest. She hesitated, turning the words over in her head. She had remembered her mother saying something similar to that, once. That seemed like ages ago now.

"Crying is usually the main outlet. You see it in Ren all the time," Sousuke said.

Ran felt her heart dance in between her lungs. Of course, she knew crying was an outlet. Ren cried almost every single day. It was not new to her.

"Then there are others who express pain through other emotions."

Ran froze.

Other emotions?

Like… like what?

She slowly turned her head over to look at Sousuke, keeping her temple leaned against her knees. She found that Sousuke was not looking at her. Instead, he gazed straight ahead to stare at the wall.

"Getting angry, lashing out, pushing people away… those can be expressions of pain," Sousuke

explained.

He suddenly reached up to grab his right shoulder, rolling it gently in its socket.

"When I hurt my shoulder, I did all of those things. Lashed out, yelled… heh, I even punched a *wall,"* Sousuke said with a dry chuckle.

It made Ran smile. Just a little.

"But my biggest mistake was pushing people away. I pushed your big brother away and hurt him a lot," Sousuke said, his face turning remorseful. "There came a day when I was at my limit and your big brother told me to let out all of my frustrations. And I did. I yelled and screamed for what seemed like ages."

Ran blinked at him, watching as his face changed from regret to relief.

"And then… I just started crying," Sousuke said softly, making Ran's heart skip a beat. "It wasn't until then that I realized that I was just using anger as a source for my pain."

Ran's breath hitched quietly and she turned her head to look down at the ground again, trying to wrap her mind around his words. Her hands clenched into fists.

What was Sousuke getting at?

"Did I actually feel angry? Of course, I did. But what I was truly feeling inside was pain and sadness," Sousuke said. "And once I realized all of that, I was able to recover."

Ran's arms began to shake.

"And slowly, bit by bit, my anger went away."

Her teeth clenched, making her jaw quiver.

"And then…"

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment.

"I felt… free."

Ran's heartstrings snapped.

She was left feeling breathless and worn.

It was over.

It was all over.

"Of course, it took a while before I even realized what was wrong, so I—"

"It was my fault…" Ran said under her breath.

Sousuke froze, and Ran could see him turn his head out of the corner of her eye.

"What did you just say?" Sousuke asked.

"I said, it's my fault," Ran said, more confidently this time. She held her knees closer to her chest, her arms beginning to shake.

"What was your fault?" Sousuke asked.

Ran shook her head, not wanting to admit a thing.

Why did her chest feel as if it were on fire?

It hurt. Everything hurt.

Her chest, her head, her arms, her heart…

Everything was excruciating and she just wanted it all to *stop.*

"Ran," Sousuke called again, placing a hand on her shoulder. "What are you talking about? What was your faul—"

"*Everything!"* Ran shrieked, slapping her hands over her stinging eyes.

She wanted to stop the tears and hold them back, force herself to be angry like usual. But it was far too late.

The cup had already spilled over.

"Everything was *my* fault!" Ran continued, dropping her hands from her eyes and staring up at Sousuke. "If I hadn't gotten into that argument with Mom and Dad that day, then the accident would never have happened! It was because of *me!"*

The tears were running freely now, down her cheeks and meeting at her chin to drop onto the floor. Her adrenaline was pumping hard as she sucked in another harsh breath.

"If I hadn't made Mom and Dad angry with me that day, then they wouldn't have gotten distracted!" Ran yelled. Her fists clenched so tightly that she could feel her nails starting to dig into her palms. "If anyone should be blamed for this, then it should be *me!* Because I made them mad enough to be distracted from the road and… and they would've seen the truck and…"

Ran started to hiccup as her anger sputtered out, an intense pain piercing into her chest. It felt as if there was a massive hole in her gut.

"And… Mom and Dad, they… and I…"

Her hands unclenched from her fists and she brought them up to look at her palms. Through her bleary vision, she could faintly make out the small indents left behind from her nails on her palms.

"It was all my fault."

And suddenly, the gate opened.

Ran burst into tears.

"*I want Mom and Dad!"* Ran wailed.

And Sousuke was there, wrapping his arms around Ran's body, letting her bury her face in his chest.

"I'm sorry!" she shrieked. "I'm so, so sorry!"

She could faintly hear frantic footsteps coming from down the hall and the door to their bedroom

opening.

"What's wrong?! What's… S-Sousuke?"

Ran lifted her face from Sousuke's chest to peer up at her siblings. The shocked looks on their faces only made her heart swell and forced more tears to fall from her eyes.

It hurt.

"Ren, Onii-chan…" Ran whimpered, reaching out her hands towards them. "Sorry… *I'm so sorry!"*

Suddenly, Ren and Makoto were on the floor next to Sousuke, embracing each other in one group hug. She latched onto their clothes, wanting to close any gaps that she had forced in between them for the past few months.

"What happened?" she heard Makoto ask.

Sousuke hesitated for a moment, clearing his throat.

"Makoto, we… we should talk."

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Bless my soul, You're a lonely soul

Chapter Notes

I'm sooo sorry this is so late! But to make it up to you, this chapter is super long! :)

Huuuuuge shoutout to Tayu-Chan for helping me with this massive, massive chapter. Longest one yet! Thank you and I could not have done it without you <3

ALSO!
There's MORE fanart by the awesome velvloid!!
Check it out here!

Just a word of caution:
Tw for vomit, graphic depictions of violence, and trauma.

Happy reading~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"Makoto, let's go get some lunch while the twins are at school. We'll have a nice meal, just the three of us!"

Makoto glanced up at his mom from the kitchen table and smiled, standing to his feet.

"Okay!" he agreed.

"Where would you like to go, Makoto?" his dad asked, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

Makoto put a hand to his chin, thinking it over carefully. "Oh! Why don't we go to that ramen place on the other side of town? I haven't been there in ages!"

His parents nodded and glanced at each other with smiles.

"We haven't been there in a while, either," his mom confessed. "That sounds like a great idea. Let's go!"

Makoto smiled and followed his parents out to their car. He climbed into the back and sat behind the driver's seat while his parents climbed in the front seat.

"So, the twins are still at school?" Makoto asked, clicking in his seatbelt.

His dad sighed heavily and lifted up a hand to rub his nose underneath his glasses.

"Yeah, Ran was throwing a fit this morning about it," he said.

Makoto's eyes widened. "Ran did?"

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"Yes, she had quite the attitude this morning," his mom said, giving a small smile. "But she'll get over it once she sees you. I'm sure she's itching to get out of school."

Makoto smiled warmly. "I can't wait to see them."

"Mmn. They will definitely be delighted to see you," his dad said. "Now, then! Let's go get some food. I'm starving."

Makoto and his mom both nodded at the same time, sending each other wide smiles.

"Agreed!"

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"I know you said school was going okay, but have you adjusted to life in the big city?" his dad asked, peering at him through the rearview mirror.

Makoto nodded. "Yeah. I mean, like I said, it's very crowded. But it's fine. I've gotten used to it."

"And you're safe?" his mom asked. "Cities are scary places, aren't they?"

"Not necessarily. It's pretty safe and the people are nice," Makoto said. "It doesn't beat home, but I still really like it."

His dad smiled as the car slowed to a stop at a busy intersection.

"I knew you'd get used to it," he said. "You've always adapted well. You did really well when we had to move away from the ocean."

"I want Mom and Dad!"

Makoto sighed and ran a hand down his face, feeling the tips of his ears burn.

"Yeah. Sorry for freaking out so much as a child," Makoto apologized, feeling mortified for forcing his parents to move in the first place.

His mom turned back and patted his knee. "Makoto, it wasn't your fault. You had so many traumatic experiences with water that it was causing you panic attacks. As a ten-year-old! Don't beat yourself up over it, sweetie."

Makoto smiled, still a blush on his cheeks. "Well, still. I'd like to try and make it up to you someday."

His dad pressed on the gas to the car and pulled out into the intersection.

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"There's no need for that, Makoto," his dad assured.

"He's right, Makoto," his mom said.

"I want Mom and Dad!"

His mom turned back in the seat to look at him with a fond smile.

"Makoto, we're so proud of you."

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"We love you very mu—"

CRASH!

Makoto jerked awake, his lungs sucking in air so fast that it hurt, and once again, he was greeted by a dark ceiling.

His chest rose and fell at a frantic rate and he desperately glanced around the room to ground himself. His eyes landed on the digital clock on the far side of the room, the red lights reading 5:30 in the morning.

Right. He was on the couch the living room of his apartment.

It was not uncommon for him have that nightmare, but this past nightmare felt disturbingly real. He could almost feel his dad's loving hand ruffling his hair and patting his back, and he could have sworn he smelled his mother's perfume.

But of course, those touches and smells were ripped away by the jolting sound of their car smashing.

Makoto breathed in, held his breath, and counted.

One, two, three…

He was fine.

Everything was…

"I want Mom and Dad!"

Ran's voice echoed in his mind from the night before, making his hands grip the blanket that was lying over his torso.

If Sousuke had not been there…

He turned his head to look at the floor, seeing Sousuke sleeping away peacefully on the guest futon next to him.

"Makoto, we… we should talk."

Makoto's breath hitched and he threw the covers off of him, quietly gathering up his work uniform and heading straight to the bathroom. He closed the door behind him and put a hand to his chest, feeling his heart fluttering rapidly against his palm.

It will be okay. It will all be okay.

With a few swift movements, he had undressed and turned on the showerhead. The warm water trickled through his hair and slid down his broad back, instantly soothing the jagged thoughts buzzing around in his mind.

Relax, he told himself as he pumped some shampoo into his palm. *I just need to work like I always do.*

He rubbed the shampoo through his hair, his fingers carding through his brown locks and brushing back his fringe.

Then, I'll have enough money for a new apartment. And Sato-san…

Sato-san…

Makoto scrubbed his head a little harder as the stress reached his arms, making his fingers go rigid against his scalp.

It'll be fine… It has to be.

I don't have a choice.

I… I…

Makoto's fingers found the long, bumpy scar on the back of his head and he froze.

The dream…

Why? Makoto thought. *Why did this all have to happen?*

He could hear his sister's loud cries and he reached up to cover his ears. He could hear the shuddering sound of metal scraping against metal when the truck impacted their tiny car, sending them spinning and spinning.

"I want Mom and Dad!"

It hurts.

"He said that he would have to report it to Social Services."

It… hurts.

"Makoto, we're so proud of you."

No…

"We love you very mu—"

"Makoto?"

Makoto gasped, dropping the showerhead onto the ground. His mind was still frozen in the past, the crash echoing in his brain.

There were a few frantic knocks on the door that slowly pulled Makoto back to reality.

"Makoto? Oi! Are you okay?"

Sousuke. It was just Sousuke.

Makoto scrambled to turn off the shower, his shaking hands struggling to grip the handle. Once it was shut off, he huffed and leaned his forehead against the wall.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," Makoto said with a raspy voice. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes, letting the remaining steam rise into his pores, hoping and praying that they would calm his pounding head.

"Oh really?"

And suddenly, the door to the bathroom slung open, and Makoto let out an embarrassed squeak, his hands covering up as much of himself as he could.

"S-S-*Sousuke!"* Makoto gasped, a maddening blush reaching all the way down to his chest. Makoto's trembling hand reached down to grab his towel and he quickly wrapped it around his waist.

Sousuke rolled his eyes and folded his arms across his chest.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," Sousuke grumbled.

"Huh?!"

"Never mind that. I heard something fall. You all right?" Sousuke asked, his face turning a little soft.

Makoto finally turned towards him, one hand brushing his bangs back and the other holding onto the towel around his waist. He remembered all of the thoughts that led up to him almost panicking in the bathroom, and he was almost thankful that Sousuke had brought all of those thoughts to a screeching halt before he could hurt himself.

"Oh, mmn," Makoto hummed, turning towards his clothes and starting to put them on. "I just dropped the showerhead. That's all."

Sousuke studied him with narrowed eyes and pressed lips. It made the tips of Makoto's ears redden and burn and he scrambled to pull his pants on over his briefs.

"Have you lost weight?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto squeaked again and placed his arms protectively around his bare torso. He hunched in on himself and shamefully looked up at Sousuke.

"W-What are you talking about?" Makoto asked.

"You…" Sousuke paused, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "You just… look thinner than you used to."

Makoto glanced down at himself, noticing how his black slacks were loose at his waist. It made his stomach twist; whether out of hunger or nausea, he was not sure. He tried to hide his grimace he pulled on his white undershirt, hiding away his flushed skin.

"Maybe you've just gained more muscle," Makoto said with a small smile.

"Makoto…" Sousuke said, not buying Makoto's chipper attitude.

"I'm fine, Sousuke," Makoto said, pulling on his white button-up shirt and struggling to pull the buttons through their holes. "Really."

Sousuke sighed and shook his head, moving forward and batting Makoto's hands out of the way.

"Idiot. Can't even button your own shirt," Sousuke grumbled. Makoto smiled a little, letting his hands drop to his sides and Sousuke buttoned up his shirt.

Then, a flash of pain suddenly pierced through Makoto's skull and he hissed, reaching up to

massage his head where the scar lay hidden underneath his hair. The bumps from the staples made him cringe and sent shivers down his spine.

"Makoto? What's wrong?"

Makoto cracked open his eyes to see Sousuke staring at him with worried eyes.

"Is it a headache again?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto dropped his hand from his head and gave a small smile trying to wave him off.

"I'm all right," Makoto assured. "It'll pass."

Probably.

"You should stay home, Makoto," Sousuke said, forgetting to fasten the last button on Makoto's shirt. "Give me your boss' number. I'll give him a call and tell him to give you a day off."

Makoto's chest seized and he shook his head.

"N-No, I'm fine. Really," Makoto said. "I need to go to work. I *have* to."

"Why? It's just one day off," Sousuke said. "Last night was… a lot. Maybe… maybe you should stay home to recover."

Makoto's brows upturned and creased as he grimaced, his thoughts drifting back to the night before.

"Last night…"

"What did you want to talk about, Sousuke?" Makoto asked as both he and Sousuke left the twins' bedroom.

Sousuke looked a little unsure of himself, his lip pulled into a tight, thin line. He crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall next to the closed bedroom door.

"It's about the twins," Sousuke said.

A flutter of panic jolted in Makoto's chest and he took a step closer to Sousuke, grabbing his forearm.

"What is it? What happened?" Makoto asked frantically, his eyes searching Sousuke's.

Sousuke unfolded his arms and placed a hand on Makoto's shoulder, his brows upturning sadly.

"Hey, calm down. They're not hurt or anything," Sousuke said.

Makoto felt relief but it was not enough to calm his worried heart.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

Sousuke gnawed on his bottom lip and then sighed, shaking his head. His mannerisms were frightening.

"Today, when I went to go pick them up, the principal said something about their fight," Sousuke

said.

Makoto's brows knitted together in confusion. "The principal?"

Sousuke nodded. "He said that…" He paused, pulling his bottom lip to nibble in between his teeth once again. He took a deep breath and looked at Makoto with frustration in his eyes. "He said that he would have to report it to Social Services."

Makoto's eyes widened. "Social Services?"

Sousuke nodded again, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yeah. I'm not really sure what that means for you, but…" Sousuke paused, taking time to look into Makoto's eyes. "The principal… didn't look happy."

"No!" Makoto suddenly shouted, internally slapping himself when he noticed Sousuke flinch. "I'll be fine. I need to get to work."

"Wait," Sousuke called as Makoto scrambled past him and headed towards the front door. "Hold on, Makoto. Are you sure about this? Let's just talk things through."

Makoto knelt down at the genkan and pulled on his shoes, throwing a wobbly smile back at Sousuke.

"I'm fine, Sousuke. The headache will pass," Makoto said, standing to his feet once his shoes were tied. He grabbed his jacket and quickly pulled it over his shoulders. "Can you keep an eye on the twins today?"

"Makoto—"

"Thank you, Sousuke! I owe you one!" Makoto said, and he reached the doorknob.

"Wait!"

"Bye!"

Makoto slammed the door behind him and hurried off, holding his breath to keep the panic from overtaking him.

He had to work to get more money for a new apartment.

He could not give Sato another reason to see him as unfit to be Ran and Ren's guardian.

Makoto headed down to work with his hands tucked into his coat pockets. It was a lonely morning without the twins by his side, but with his raging headache, he was a little thankful that he did not have to keep a sharp eye on anyone. He was struggling to maneuver through the crowds with his own foggy head and he was unsure if he could handle watching two others.

He almost passed the restaurant, his legs, out of habit, carrying him towards Ran and Ren's middle school. He sighed upon entering the restaurant, knowing that this day of work would be long and mentally arduous.

Putting on his best smile, he headed to the back to the truck drop-off and immediately got to work,

unloading box after box of the usual spices. It helped to keep his mind off of things for a while, but his headache reared its ugly head once again when he brought the last box in and smelled the food in the kitchen. The soup they were preparing today smelled spicy, disagreeing with Makoto's already pounding head and twisting gut.

"Tachibana."

Makoto glanced up from where he was crouched next to the pantry and spotted his boss standing in front of him with a thoughtful look on his face. Makoto's lips wobbled into a small smile to greet him.

"Oh, good morning, Nanase-san," Makoto said.

Nanase nodded in response and then glanced at all of the boxes surrounding the pantry.

"You finished unloading the truck already?" Nanase asked.

Makoto's smile felt more confident this time as he slowly stood to his feet and placed his hands on his hips.

"Mmn! This load isn't as heavy as some of the others," Makoto explained. "I just have to get them organized with the other spices."

"I see. But you can do that during your shift," Nanase said, and then he pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "Want to learn a new recipe? I've got something fairly easy picked out."

Bless Nanase and his offer to distract his mind.

"Of course," Makoto said with a smile.

He followed Nanase to the kitchen with a small smile on his face. He washed his hands at the sink and put on a spare apron.

"What do you have in mind to make?" Makoto asked, appearing next to Nanase at the counter.

Nanase looked at him and pointed to a large pot.

"Potato soup. It's not exactly traditional but it's been really popular lately," Nanase explained.

"Oh, that sounds really good," Makoto said, trying to shake the tremor in his voice. He supposed he still felt out of sorts from the frightening nightmare.

"Mmn. It's not difficult to make, either. I'll start peeling the potatoes," Nanase said.

"What can I do?" Makoto asked.

Nanase pursed his lips and glanced around the kitchen for a moment before scurrying off to the pantry. He came back with an armload of onions and placed them down on the counter. Then, he pulled out a wooden cutting board along with a very large, sharp knife.

"Here. You remember how to chop onions, right?" Nanase asked.

Makoto nodded, gulping when Nanase handed him the large knife.

"Yeah, I remember," Makoto said.

"Good," Nanase said. "Just take it slow if you need to. Once you get those chopped up, I'll show you how to sauté them."

Makoto nodded, feeling more than enthusiastic. "Okay!"

Nanase stepped away from him to go to the other side of the kitchen while Makoto concentrated on the onion on the cutting board. He heard Nanase rummaging behind him through the cabinets, probably to get the right pan to cook the onions.

Makoto took a deep breath and placed his hand on the onion.

"Bend your fingers in…" Makoto whispered to himself. "Keep one finger on top of the blade and…"

The knife sliced through the onion cleanly, leaving pieces to fall down against the cutting board. Makoto smiled, feeling accomplished. It was such a simple task, but he was doing it without any kind of supervision. With his new skills, Makoto could create all sorts of dishes for the twins. Maybe, with more practice and lessons, Makoto could even make better lunches to pack for them.

He felt excitement spark through his bones as he lifted the knife again and turned the onion, ready to slice.

Just as he was lowering the knife, a loud noise made him freeze on the spot.

There was a loud crash.

And there were sounds of glass shattering and clinking everywhere.

A… loud… crash…

CRASH!

The loud bang made Makoto's ears ring.

Glass flew everywhere, hitting his face and neck.

And then, the car started to roll.

Once, twice…

And then…

SLAM.

Makoto's vision briefly turned to black, his mind disoriented and dazed as he tried to blink back into consciousness.

When his vision finally cleared, Makoto found his world completely upside-down.

'Huh?' Makoto thought drearily. 'Is the car… upside down?'

He heard something dripping below him and he tilted his head back to see blood dropping onto the ceiling of the car.

'Where… where's that blood coming from?' Makoto thought.

He felt something trickling through his hair and he reached up to touch his head. When he pulled his hand back to look at it, his entire palm was coated in bright red blood.

'Oh,' Makoto thought. 'Is that coming from me?'

Makoto blinked slowly. He did not feel any pain but he knew he was bleeding.

But why was it so hard to focus?

Everything was so blurry and it was so, so *difficult to think straight.*

What… was wrong with him?

What just happened?

Makoto turned his head to look up towards the front seats of the car. He could vaguely make out the blurry shapes of his parents hanging limply by their seatbelts. There was blood everywhere but Makoto chose not to focus on that. Instead, he reached out his hand to them, feeling his body starting to grow weak.

"Tachibana…"

"Mom… Dad…" he rasped. "I…"

"Tachibana!"

And then, his world faded to black.

"Tachibana!"

Makoto jolted and blinked rapidly, the white wall of the restaurant's kitchen coming back into view. He did not realize he was holding his breath until he released a puff of air, letting his lungs relax. He panted softly, shuddering breaths leaving his mouth.

"Tachibana…"

Makoto blinked again and turned towards the sound of the voice next to him. He came into contact with some of the other chefs in the kitchen, all of who were staring at him with strange faces. He saw glass spread out all over the kitchen floor, a chef sweeping up the mess with a broom.

Oh, Makoto thought. *So someone dropped a glass…*

"Tachibana!"

Makoto jolted again and looked down. He was met with a stormy sea of wild blue eyes. Nanase was staring back at him with his jaw slackened.

"Are you okay?" Nanase asked. "You've cut yourself."

Makoto suddenly felt a slight pressure on his wrists and noticed that Nanase was holding his trembling arms steady. He glanced down at his hands and noticed the large cut on his forefinger, the blood rushing out in quick spurts.

Makoto gulped.

He did not even feel it.

"I…" Makoto started, his voice trembling badly.

"Here," Nanase said softly, his hand curling around Makoto's to take the knife from him. He slowly pulled Makoto's fingers from the knife and took it from his grasp, lying it down on the cutting board. He then grabbed a towel and pressed it to Makoto's cut. "C'mon, let's go to the break room. There's a first aid kit in there."

Makoto nodded mutely, his eyes flickering back to see his blood coating the cutting board and stray pieces of onion. He winced at the sight, feeling a shudder run through his body.

But before Makoto could even start to feel guilty, he was pulled out of the kitchen, avoiding the looks from the other chefs as he passed them. Nanase had a light grip on his elbow, guiding him to the back room. Luckily, the restaurant was still void of customers.

"Go sit at the table," Nanase said as he opened the door to the break room.

Makoto nodded and hummed, sitting down on a wobbly chair. He held the towel to his finger and hissed. He was finally starting to feel the sting.

"Okay, let me see," Nanase said, sitting down next to him with a white box in his hand.

Makoto leaned forward and removed the bloodied towel from his finger. Nanase gently grabbed ahold of his wrist and pulled his hand closer to inspect the cut. He pulled his lip to the side and then reached into the first aid kit to grab the disinfectant.

"You cut it really deep. Did you not even notice?" Nanase asked, taking the disinfectant and spraying it over the cut.

Makoto hissed at the sting and he shook his head. "N-No, I… I guess I didn't."

Nanase narrowed his eyes but continued to dab Makoto's finger, Makoto desperately trying not to flinch at the pain. The bleeding had finally stopped and Makoto was able to see the long cut that, quite frighteningly, looked as if he was trying to cut off his own finger.

"You might need stitches," Nanase mumbled. "Do you want to go to the hospital? I'll go with you."

Makoto winced at the word *hospital* and shook his head furiously. His free hand gripped the edge of his chair and he clenched his jaw.

"Okay. Do you want to go home early? Nanase asked.

Makoto remained silent and motionless, pondering it carefully. His headache was verging on the far side of severe and he would be able to spend time with Sousuke and the twins.

The twins…

Makoto grimaced.

"He said that he would have to report it to Social Services."

No. He had to work to get more money towards the new apartment.

Makoto shook his head again. "No, I… I'll be fine," he assured.

Nanase paused, turning back to the first aid kit to grab a roll of bandages, and Makoto lowered his head to peer down at his lap. Was Nanase upset? Was he going to get fired?

"Was…" Nanase's voice startled Makoto. It was loud enough to boom in the empty room but it sounded timid and small, very out of character for his boss. Nanase cleared his throat and tried again. "Was… everything okay yesterday?"

Makoto whipped his head up as Nanase wrapped the bandage around his finger. His jaw quivered as he tried to form a sentence, the events swirling back into his mind.

"I want Mom and Dad!"

Makoto swallowed thickly and looked down at his lap.

"Yeah. Everything was fine," Makoto assured.

Nanase finished off the bandage and looked at him squarely, his soft gaze replaced by a harsh stare.

"I see…" Nanase said, turning his head back to Makoto's finger. "Well, try not to use your finger today. I'd consider going to a clinic or something after work."

Makoto took a deep breath and nodded, cradling his hand back to look at the freshly applied bandage on his finger. He sighed quietly as Nanase clicked the first aid kit closed and he stood up from the table.

Then it was Nanase's turn to pause as he waited by Makoto's side, his eyes looking down at him with a soft expression.

"Are you sure you can work today?" Nanase asked, his voice quieter than Makoto had ever heard him.

Makoto glanced up at him, seeing the slight quirk in Nanase's brow. He opened his mouth to speak, but his breath caught when he remembered the blood on the cutting board, the glass shattering on the kitchen floor, the pavement…

"Yeah," Makoto answered, startling himself back to reality.

Blood on the ground.

The sounds of scraping metal.

Two body bags.

He felt sick to his stomach.

"I'll be fine."

Work was incredibly slow. Makoto's headache came back at full force throughout his shift and his stinging finger proved to be an issue while handling the boxes. But he did his best to ignore the pain and focus on the tasks he had for the day. He was just thankful that he did not have to work a second shift that day.

When it was nearing four in the afternoon, Makoto found himself in the break room, gathering up his things from his locker. His head was positively aching but he dragged on, pulling his coat out

of the locker.

But just as he was about to pull it on, the door to the break room opened.

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto whirled around to face the door and saw two familiar faces standing in the doorway.

"Huh? Ran? Ren?" Makoto asked as they rushed towards him and hugged his waist. "What are you guys doing here?"

Ran looked up at him, a tired smile on her face. He noticed how red and puffy her eyes were and he bit back a grimace. He hoped that it was just from the night before and not from crying all day.

"Sousuke-nii-chan brought us!" Ran said.

"Eh? He did?" Makoto asked. "He remembered how to get back here?"

"Well, we had to help him…" Ren said, averting his eyes towards the door.

Makoto smiled softly. *Of course.*

"Where is Sousuke?" Makoto asked.

"Oh, uh… he was out by the kitchen with Nanase-san," Ran said with a crooked smile.

"He looked kinda mad…" Ren said.

Makoto's frown vanished from his face and he suddenly felt the throbbing in his head come back. It was more aggravated than before.

"Who looked mad? Nanase-san or Sousuke?" Makoto asked.

Ran and Ren exchanged looks, studying each other for a moment before staring back up at Makoto.

"Both of them," Ran and Ren said at the same time.

Makoto sighed and pulled on his coat.

"All right. Let's go see what they're up to," Makoto said, ushering them out of the break room.

He led his siblings out to the restaurant floor and headed towards the kitchen, where he found both Nanase and Sousuke staring each other down.

"Why are *you* here?" Nanase asked.

"I'm just here to pick up Makoto," Sousuke said, staring down at Nanase with hooded eyes.

"He knows how to get home."

"And he woke up with a bad headache this morning so I wanted to make sure he was okay."

Makoto sighed and reached up to rub his head, desperately wanting the knocking against his brain to stop. He took a deep breath and dropped his hand.

"Guys, guys!" Makoto called, stepping in between them and placing a tentative hand on their

chests. "Please, just calm down. There's no reason for—"

"What happened to your hand?!"

Makoto turned his head to see Sousuke grabbing at his wrist, staring at the bandage on his finger.

"He cut himself this morning with a knife while I was teaching him a new recipe," Nanase explained.

Sousuke snapped his head up to glare back at Nanase. "You were teaching him how to cook? Did you not even teach him how to hold a knife properly?!"

"Of course I did," Nanase snapped. "He seemed to be…" He briefly turned his gaze to Makoto, his brows creasing, before looking back at Sousuke. "…distracted."

"Distracted?" Sousuke said. "He should be doing his job, not messing around with *you!"*

"It was his choice to want lessons," Nanase quipped.

"Maybe you should take some lessons on how to be a good boss!"

"*Enough!"* Makoto shouted, bringing his hands up to his aching head. He dug his fingers into the scar, trying to claw the pain out of his head.

"Makoto?" Sousuke said gently, and Makoto felt a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up to see two pairs of worried eyes staring back at him, both vibrant and caring.

"My finger is fine, Sousuke," Makoto said, letting his hands fall from his head.

"He probably needs stiches," Nanase added softly.

"Stitches?" Sousuke echoed. "Makoto, we should go to a clinic or a hospital."

"No, no…" Makoto said, feeling his chest run cold. "I… I don't want to go."

The last time he was in a hospital…

"Please, Sousuke, I…"

He felt incredibly cold.

"There's something we need to talk about."

Makoto blinked slowly up at Sousuke as he lied in the hospital bed, his body sluggish and his head aching. He still had Ran and Ren in his arms, Ren still sobbing away against his chest.

"Huh? What is it, Sousuke?" Makoto asked, clearing his throat when it caught.

Sousuke seemed to hesitate, his eyes flitting down to the twins. He reached forward and patted their heads.

"Can you guys step outside for a minute?" Sousuke asked softly, his voice trembling. "I need to talk with your big brother."

Makoto's brows knitted together. While his mind was still in a haze, he could still sense the

seriousness in Sousuke's voice.

Ran and Ren stared up at him curiously and with a wrinkle in between their brows. They exchanged looks with each other, Ren's hands clenching in Makoto's hospital gown.

"Go ahead, guys," Makoto said. "It'll only take a minute."

Ran and Ren hesitated but were whisked away by Sousuke's gentle hands. Makoto suddenly felt cold without them and a shiver ran through his body as they left the room to stand outside the door.

Sousuke sighed once the door was shut and ran his hand down his face, his breath hitching.

"S-Sousuke?" Makoto called, reaching out his hand. "Are… are you okay?"

Sousuke hesitated by the door, taking another shuddering breath. He turned back to Makoto and approached him with a frustrated look on his face. He wiped his face again, his breaths sounding labored.

"Sousuke…" Makoto whispered, grabbing ahold of his forearm. "What's wrong?"

Sousuke let his hand drop from his face and he instead leaned down to grip both of Makoto's shoulders.

"Makoto, I… I need to… something's happened," Sousuke said.

Makoto's heart fluttered, a strangled noise escaping his mouth as he felt Sousuke grip his shoulders.

"Sousuke… what's happened?" Makoto asked.

Sousuke hung his head, his hands digging in to Makoto's shoulders.

"It's… about your parents."

Makoto's chest squeezed painfully and his stomach sank. He reached up to grip Sousuke's wrists, feeling his eyes sting.

"What happened, Sousuke?" Makoto asked softly.

Sousuke shivered and practically gasped for air as he choked on a sob. It made Makoto feel sick to his stomach and he gripped at Sousuke's wrists harder.

"Sousuke, tell me what—"

"They didn't make it."

Makoto froze, staring up at his best friend with disbelieving eyes.

What… did he just say?

"What…" Makoto whispered, Sousuke's words echoing in his mind. "What did you just…"

"They're dead, Makoto," Sousuke whimpered, the tears running down his cheeks. "Your parents, they… they didn't survive the crash."

And suddenly, as Sousuke's crying face pushed into Makoto's shoulder, the whole world froze.

And Makoto felt…

Cold.

A gentle touch on his shoulder violently pulled Makoto from his thoughts and he jumped, a pair of blue eyes staring him down.

"You should have someone look at it," Nanase said. "There's a clinic right down the street that can stitch it up."

Makoto gulped, grounding himself in Nanase's eyes, and then he nodded slowly.

"Sounds like a plan," Sousuke said stiffly, grabbing ahold of Makoto's arm. "Let's go, Makoto."

Makoto nodded again, letting Sousuke turn his body to face the front door. It felt as if he was in a dream, his body being pushed about like a limp ragdoll.

"We'll get it fixed up. I won't leave your side," Sousuke assured, pushing his back lightly. "And next time, would it kill you to watch him more carefully? You're his boss for crying out loud!"

Makoto blinked rapidly, turning his head to see Sousuke glaring back at Nanase. And Nanase was staring back with a wince in his features. He pouted and turned his head away from the both of them, allowing a curt nod in response.

"Hmph," Sousuke huffed, giving Makoto another push. "Let's go, Makoto."

Makoto glanced back at Nanase just as he was pushed out the door, managing to catch the worried look plastered on his boss' face.

The headache had still not worn off by the time Makoto went to work the following day. And to make matters worse, he was wearing an itchy bandage over his forefinger, hiding the five stitches that the doctor had given him.

Sousuke was livid the entire time, grumbling about Nanase or his job.

"Why would you listen to his *advice and not* mine*?! I've known you longer!"*

"Yeah, yeah…" Makoto whispered as he rearranged the shelves in the pantry. He was almost done organizing everything before the lunch rush would hit. And once that happened, the pantry would most likely become a disaster zone.

Makoto sighed, wondering if the chefs had gotten more careless since he was hired.

Oh well, Makoto thought as he stood to his feet. He turned to leave the pantry but felt his head spin, his hand reaching out to grab onto the doorframe.

"Ugh…" Makoto groaned.

Why is my head still hurting at a time like this? Makoto thought. He massaged the bumpy line of the scar and pressed, cringing when he felt the disfigured skull hidden underneath his hair.

"Tachibana?"

Makoto glanced up to see Nanase standing in front of him with slightly widened eyes.

"You okay?" he asked.

Makoto took in a deep breath and straightened himself against the doorframe, chuckling softly.

"Y-Yeah," Makoto said. "Just a headache."

Haru's brows pressed together. "Headache? Again?"

Makoto shook his head and waved his hand in the air.

"It's not so bad," Makoto said, almost frantically. He quickly wanted to change the subject away from his aching head. "So, what are you doing here, Nanase-san?"

Nanase hesitated before glancing down at Makoto's finger.

"I wanted to check up on you. Did you end up getting stitches yesterday?" Nanase asked, pointing to his hand.

Makoto lifted up his hand and wiggled his finger slightly, grimacing when it stung a little.

"Yeah," Makoto said.

"Can I see?" Nanase asked.

Makoto paused, swallowing thickly, before offering his hand to Nanase. Nanase took his hand and inspected the bandage, his brows pinched together in concentration.

"Did they give you stitches?" Nanase asked, turning Makoto's hand over.

"Mmn," Makoto answered. "Five."

Nanase winced and released Makoto's hand, standing straight to look up at him.

"Sorry. I probably should've been the one to cut the onions," Nanase apologized.

Makoto shook his head and waved his hand in the air, wincing again when his finger stung.

"No, really! It's fine, Nanase-san," Makoto said. "I just…"

The crash.

The shattering glass.

The blood…

"I just wasn't paying attention," Makoto concluded.

Nanase blinked at him, his lips twisting to the side, and then he nodded.

"Well… as long as you're okay," Nanase said.

Makoto managed a small smile and nodded.

"I'm fine," Makoto assured.

"And your headache?" Nanase asked, his brows upturning.

Makoto tried to make his smile wider and he opened his mouth to answer.

"Yeah, it's…"

His sentence trailed off when a busboy walked by with a few black trash bags in his hands. He placed the trash bags by the door to the truck offloading room and then walked away while wiping his brow.

Makoto's heart started to pound faster at the sight of those bags. It made his stomach squeeze and then release, sending nausea up his chest in waves.

What? Makoto thought. *What's… wrong with… me?*

"Right this way, Tachibana-san."

Makoto grimaced as he was carefully guided off of the elevator. Every muscle in his body protested against him but he had to see for himself.

He had to confirm it for himself that what Sousuke had told him was actually true.

"All right. Just a few more steps," the nurse said, holding his torso up.

Makoto did not respond. All he felt was the ache in his chest and the denial coursing through his brain. Not a single tear had been shed.

The bandages that held his skull together itched.

They approached a man wearing a white lab coat and glasses, his hands held together in front of him.

"This is the medical examiner," the nurse introduced.

The man bowed and Makoto wanted to bow back but the nurse's hand on his chest kept him from doing so. He simply nodded his head slowly, barely making eye contact.

"Are you sure this is wise?" the medical examiner asked the nurse.

The nurse nodded. "He requested it when he found out and the doctors released him as soon as they could. He wanted to… confirm it."

Makoto hated this. He hated them talking about him as if he were not there. He was standing right in the room for crying out loud. He was not some ignorant, helpless child.

"All right. Well… if the doctors are sure. Then, Tachibana-san," the medical examiner started, finally turning his attention towards Makoto. "Come right this way."

Makoto, with the nurse's aid, shuffled along the dark tiles of the morgue, his heart finally kicking in gear as he came upon two tables with long, black bags resting on them.

Body bags.

Makoto shuddered, coming to a stop at the ends of the tables, his eyes fixed on the shiny zippers.

"All right, Tachibana-san. I'm going to open them and I'll need you to confirm that these are your parents," the medical examiner said. "Can you do that?"

Makoto was about to nod but the pain made him dizzy. He hummed instead and tightened his hands into fists.

The examiner's hands reached up to both of the bags, his fingers pinching the zippers.

His chest felt like it was caving in and his stomach flipping endlessly.

He thought he was going to be sick.

The examiner pulled down the zippers and pulled open the flaps.

Makoto froze, his heart pounding faster and faster.

It was his mother and father, but their faces were pale, mixed together with black and blue bruises and little cuts that littered their faces. Their eyes were closed, giving the appearance of sleep.

And…

Where were his dad's glasses? Why were they not on his face? He needed his glasses to see...

And his mom… she should not look so sad. She was always lively, a large smile on her face.

But they…

They were…

Makoto's stomach suddenly twisted and he lurched, his hand coming up to his mouth.

His parents were right there, right there*, but they were dead. They were lifeless and gone and he would not be able to speak to them ever again.*

What Sousuke had told him was true.

They really were gone.

Bile rose into his stomach and he scrambled to the side as quickly as his limp body would allow him and he crouched over the small trashcan in the corner to empty everything that had entered his stomach within the past day.

"Oh my goodness! Tachibana-san!" the nurse exclaimed, immediately rushing by his side and rubbing his back. "Call someone! Get a gurney!"

Mom… Dad…

"Hang on, Tachibana-san. Just hang on. Where's that gurney?!"

I'm… sorry.

Makoto felt the nausea overtake him as bile rose to his throat. He slapped a hand over his mouth and hurried out of the pantry area, stumbling out of the room and towards the restaurant floor.

"Tachibana?!" a familiar voice called after him.

But Makoto did not wait. He rushed to the bathroom where he threw himself into a stall and heaved into a toilet. His hand went down to hold his stomach, feeling the pain as his stomach emptied.

Why? He thought, as he retched more stomach acid into the toilet. *Why did that memory have to come back? Why? Why?!*

The sound of a door opening and closing caused him to jolt and cough, his stomach clenching and unclenching painfully. His hand pressed further into his stomach, begging it to stop.

"Tachibana?"

Makoto shook his head, barely able to keep the nausea at bay. He tried to speak but he coughed, leaning over the toilet again to dry heave.

There were a few footsteps and then that same familiar voice echoed in the small bathroom. He felt a shadow from behind and he shuddered when he felt a hand on his back.

"Tachibana… are you all right?" Nanase called.

Makoto coughed, reaching over with a trembling hand to flush the toilet. He sat back and slouched against the stall wall, Nanase crouching down with him. He kept a firm hand on Makoto's shoulder.

"I… I'm fine…" Makoto said, his voice trembling.

Nanase did not waver in his gaze and his hand tightened on his shoulder.

"You need to go home," Nanase said firmly.

Makoto swallowed, his stomach finally starting to settle. He took a shaky breath and shook his head.

"I… I don't want to abandon my shift," Makoto said weakly.

"Don't worry about it," Nanase said softly. "You're obviously not well. You should call your friend to pick you up."

Makoto sighed and leaned his head back against the bathroom stall, trying to catch his breath. His body tingled all over and it made him shiver.

"My phone… it's in the… the break room," Makoto said between breaths.

Nanase twisted his lips and then stood to his feet. He held down a hand to Makoto, a sight that he had seen many times before in their previous encounters.

"Well, let's go," Nanase said.

Makoto stared at the hand offered down to him and he flushed, feeling the shame and embarrassment finally starting to settle like a weight in his too-empty stomach. He hung his head and reached up to weakly latch onto Nanase's hand, praying that his boss would not feel how sweaty and gross his palm had become.

"You're warm," Nanase said as he draped an arm around Makoto's waist to stabilize him. "Are you running a fever?"

Makoto shook his head. "I-I don't think so," he said softly.

Nanase hesitated, looking unsure, but he turned his head towards the door.

"Okay," Nanase said. But his gentle hand curved around Makoto's side and gripped his waist firmly. "Let's go call your friend."

"Go lie down on the couch. I'll look for some medicine."

Makoto sighed at Sousuke's command but trudged over to the couch to sit down. He was surprised Sousuke made it to the restaurant at all, even though he had to wait with a fuming Nanase in the break room for him to show up.

Seriously, how could Sousuke forget how to get somewhere he had already been?

When Makoto heard some voices from behind, he glanced over his shoulder to watch Sousuke traverse down the hallway and he saw two pairs of eyes peeking around the corner.

"Is Onii-chan okay, Sousuke-nii?" Ren asked in a wobbly voice, reaching up to tug on Sousuke's shirt.

"He's home from work early," Ran said, tugging on the other side of Sousuke's shirt.

Sousuke's hands touched the twins' heads and he guided them back down the hallway and out of Makoto's sight.

"Yeah, he's just not feeling well." Sousuke's voice echoed softly down the hallway. "Can you guys do your homework in your room for now so he can rest?"

"Oh, yeah!"

"We'll be super quiet!"

"Mmn. Good. I'll call you when dinner is ready."

There were a few soft clicks of shutting doors and then silence. Makoto could faintly hear some shuffling coming from the bathroom and he assumed that Sousuke was looking for the right medicine for him to take.

Makoto sighed and leaned his head back against the couch cushions, slouching in his seat. The nausea had finally worn off but his head still ached terribly. He hoped Sousuke could find some good painkillers that would not upset his stomach.

His arm flopped lazily over his eyes and he huffed out another breath. Today had been a disaster. How in the world could he show his face to Nanase again?

Makoto whined and dug his hand into the couch cushion.

How mortifying!

Makoto's back started to ache with his slouching and he sighed again, groaning when he sat up. His limbs were heavy, heavier than they had been… in a long time.

He glanced over his shoulder to see the shrines tucked away in the corner, hidden away and out of sight. He could barely see the reflection off of the picture in the center.

Makoto winced, his face scrunching up painfully.

Mom… Dad…

Makoto's body had never felt heavier.

The chair was stiff against his aching back and he struggled to breathe with his still-healing ribs. His head pounded against his skull, the bandages uncomfortably tight.

But, even with all of the pain, Makoto still felt numb.

And he hated it.

The room was filled with crying people but Makoto could hardly hear it. He was too focused on the pictures of his smiling parents that were at the front of the room. It made his stomach flip uneasily.

The last time he had seen their faces, they were not smiling.

They were pale and broken.

And... lifeless.

…Where were his father's glasses again?

Makoto suddenly heard a soft sniffle by his side and he turned to see Ren pitifully choking back sobs. Fat tears rolled down his cheeks and met at his chin, sliding down to plop on his black pants.

It hurt.

Everything hurt and yet…

He felt numb.

Makoto reached out and grabbed Ren's shoulder, making him jump and look up at him with watery brown eyes. He looked as if he would break any minute and it made Makoto's heart sink.

He tried to give Ren a smile, hoping that it would somewhat calm him, but he knew it was a mistake the minute he tried. Ren's face scrunched up even worse and he cried even harder and Makoto mentally slapped himself. He hastily pulled Ren close, wrapping his arms around him.

He could feel the smile fall from his face as he squeezed harder, his eyes roaming to see Ran. She was staring at them with cloudy eyes and pinched brows until she snapped her head away from them.

Makoto's heart squeezed and he cut his eyes to the pictures at the front of the room. He saw his parents' smiling faces and he remembered all of the times that they were there to soothe the twins' cries. He remembered how his parents were always the ones to tuck in the twins to bed and help them with homework or clubs, especially since Makoto was so busy with his own schoolwork.

Suddenly, a thought popped into Makoto's head and it made his chest freeze and then shatter, leaving him feeling empty.

Would it have been better if they were here instead of him?

A loud ring ripped Makoto from his thoughts, making him gasp.

When the living room finally came back into view, the ringing became clearer and he realized it was his phone. He jumped, his hands scrambling to reach for his phone in his pocket. He fumbled with the small device for a few moments before hitting the green button and lifting the phone to his ear without looking at the screen.

"H-Hello?" Makoto asked, a little breathless.

"Good afternoon, Tachibana-san."

Makoto's blood suddenly turned to ice in his veins.

"S… Sato-san," Makoto said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I hope I'm not interrupting?" Sato said, the end of her sentence lilting into a question.

Makoto's free hand clenched into a fist on his lap.

"N-No. I just… got off of work," Makoto said.

"Well good, I'm glad I caught you," Sato said. "I have an important matter to discuss with you, Tachibana-san."

Makoto gulped. He could almost hear his heart pounding against his chest.

He hoped Sousuke would bring him some nausea medicine, too.

"Oh?" Makoto asked softly.

"Yes. I received a phone call from Ran and Ren's principal," Sato started, and Makoto's hand gripping the phone tightened. "He told me there was an incident involving them. Something about them… getting into a fight?"

Makoto released a shuddering breath and stared down at his socked feet in between in knees.

Mom, Dad… please help me through this.

"Yes, they… they did fight," Makoto said softly.

His hands started to shake.

"I see. And now they are suspended from school?" Sato asked.

"Yes," Makoto answered. "They go back the day after tomorrow."

"Hmm," Sato hummed thoughtfully. "I also got word that you did not show up to the meeting with the principal and that a… *family friend* went to pick up the twins on your behalf."

Makoto's eyes squeezed shut.

"Yes," Makoto admitted.

Sato paused on the other line, and Makoto thought he could hear the faint sounds of scribbling. He wondered if Sato was writing up a report.

"Tachibana-san, I must admit that this incident has caused a stir here," Sato said.

Makoto's eyes popped open and he straightened his back, feeling his chest sinking in like a black hole.

"It… it has?" Makoto asked. He was on high alert now, hearing the roaring of his heart in his ears.

Sato sighed. "You see… if there are any incidents or troubles at home or school that are reported to our offices, they are immediately tacked on to the reports. And the more incident reports you have, the harsher the inspections will be."

Makoto swallowed thickly, running a trembling hand through his hair. He could feel his breath hitching and coming in short spurts in his chest.

"Harsher?" Makoto repeated, feeling like a lost puppy.

"Yes. Upon the next home inspection, if I see anything out of order, then we might have to take the next step," Sato said.

Makoto's voice squeaked and cracked. "H-How can I prevent that? What can I do?"

"Have you found a bigger apartment, yet?" Sato asked.

Makoto's eyes flitted around the tiny room, his eyes landing on the pillow shoved to the side of the couch.

"No…" Makoto said, his voice quivering.

"Well, Tachibana-san," Sato said lowly, her voice bordering on threatening. "I *highly* suggest you do that."

Makoto inhaled sharply through his nose and squeezed his eyes shut again, nodding fiercely.

"Ye… Yes, ma'am," Makoto stuttered.

"Good. Have a nice day, Tachibana-san," Sato said.

"Mmn… you, too," Makoto muttered.

Once the call was done, Makoto rested the phone on the coffee table in front of him and then held his head in his hands. He took slow breaths to calm himself.

He was in no way a better parent for Ran and Ren. If anything, he had been a hindrance to them.

Mom… Dad…

His lungs tightened, threatening to strangle him.

I can't do this. They need you.

His fingers dug into his scalp.

Please… trade places with me.

Mom, Dad…

I'm sorry.

"Makoto?"

Makoto leaned up to see Sousuke at his side with a worried look on his face.

"What's wrong?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto's hands shook as he tried to come up with a sentence, but his thoughts about the last few days were scrambled. He felt lightheaded and dizzy, the thick air choking him.

"S… Sato-san called," Makoto started.

Sousuke's brows pinched together. "Sato-san?"

Makoto's lips wobbled as he tried to form a sentence.

"She's from Social Services," he said.

Sousuke paused, his jaw slackened and eyes a little wide. He placed the few pill bottles that were in his hands on the coffee table and then studied Makoto.

"What did she say?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto's breath hitched painfully in his chest and he shook his head, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair.

"She just said that… it doesn't look good," Makoto said.

Sousuke watched Makoto as he covered his eyes with his hand and let out a long, heavy sigh. He had never seen his friend looking so distressed.

"This isn't right. It's not fair to them," Makoto suddenly said, his hand dropping from his face. "Ran and Ren deserve so much better."

"Hey, calm down. It's going to be okay, Makoto," Sousuke assured. "You're doing the best you can. Social Services will see that."

"My best isn't enough. Not for them."

Sousuke's brow twitched.

"What are you talking about?" Sousuke asked, feeling the agitation rise. "You gave them a place to live, a place to sleep. You're working your ass off for them. You're taking *cooking lessons* to learn how to make better food for them. For crying out loud, Makoto, you're keeping them alive. You're doing your part as their guardian."

Makoto stared at him for a minute before lowering his gaze to stare at the floor. His head hung sadly and his face displayed fatigue.

"But Ran and Ren… they need *parents.* Not… not *this."* Makoto gestured vaguely towards himself, letting his hand flop back down on his lap. "I'm just someone that can't even raise them right. I don't even know what's going on in their own lives. I had no idea that they were so much at each other's throats that they were willing to hurt each other."

"That wasn't your fault," Sousuke protested.

"Yes, it was," Makoto said weakly. "If Mom and Dad were here, they'd know exactly what to do."

Makoto paused, hunching over and putting his face in his hands once again. He took a deep breath, letting his shoulders rise and fall slowly.

"If only they'd been the ones to live instead, then none of this would've happened to Ran and Ren," Makoto said.

It was said so quietly that Sousuke almost missed it. He replayed the sentence over and over again in his head, tossing it to and fro until it finally clicked in his brain. And when it clicked, Sousuke stopped breathing altogether. Instead, he held his breath inside his chest until it hurt.

"Makoto, you…" Sousuke started, his voice breathy. "You… couldn't possibly be feeling guilty over not dying… could you?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto jolted and then froze, a little gasp of air sucking in through his teeth.

"Oh," he breathed eventually. His hand reached up to grab a fistful of his shirt, right next to his heart. "I never really thought about it that way, but…"

Makoto took in a shuddering breath and lowered his head down. His hand gripped his shirt hard, making his knuckles turn white.

"I guess I do."

Sousuke inhaled sharply, his eyes blowing wide.

What did he just say?

"What?" Sousuke breathed. "Makoto…"

"I know," Makoto said with a lifeless laugh. He hung his head further to hide his eyes from Sousuke completely. "But… my parents didn't deserve that."

"But…" Sousuke said softly, trying to process exactly what his best friend was telling him. He felt so helpless and overwhelmed, a light flicker of panic starting to spark inside his chest. "But… that doesn't mean that you should've died in their place."

Makoto sighed, his shoulders hunching. His breaths were coming in shorter now as the panic started to build.

"But it would have been better for the twins," Makoto said, his voice sounding choked. "Mom and Dad, they… they are what's best for them. Not me."

Sousuke's heart fluttered in alarm. How long had he been suffering alone like this? How long had Makoto thought that his life was worth trading for?

How long had he held all of this in?

Sousuke thought back to that stupid funeral, how so many other people had cried. Ren, of course, cried the most. But Makoto? Makoto did not shed a single tear. He managed to even give Ren a small smile and a big hug to comfort him. But did Makoto cry?

Not at all.

Sousuke knelt down in front of Makoto, placing his hands on his knees, and peered up at his face to meet his gaze.

"Makoto… have you even had time to grieve?" Sousuke asked. Makoto's dangling fingers flinched and then stilled again. "And I don't mean a few tears here and there. I mean *actually* grieving. Taking time to mourn, to cry, to be angry, to let it all out. Have you done that? At all?"

Makoto shrunk into himself, his loose fingers now curling into fists. His shoulders rose by his ears and he shook his head side to side.

"I… no," Makoto admitted. "I haven't really… wanted to, because I didn't want the twins to see."

"But holding it in is only causing you more pain, Makoto," Sousuke said.

"I…" Makoto muttered, shaking his head. "I can't just stop what I'm doing to mourn, Sousuke."

"You *can*," Sousuke said.

Makoto raised his head to meet Sousuke's eyes and he shook his head again.

"I *can't*, Sousuke," Makoto said. "I have to be strong for the twins."

"That doesn't mean you can't cry," Sousuke said. "They were your parents, too. You have every right to feel pain."

Makoto's eyes widened, seemingly shocked by Sousuke's words. He opened and shut his mouth a few times before lowering his gaze to stare at his lap.

"They *were* my parents, too," Makoto said softly.

Sousuke leaned closer to Makoto, placing a hand on the side of his neck.

"Do you want to cry?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto hesitated, his fingers finding each other in his lap and twisting around each other nervously. He eventually nodded.

"Yes," Makoto said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I do."

Sousuke took that as his cue.

He moved his hand from Makoto's neck to the back of his head, pulling Makoto's head down and pushing his face into his shoulder.

"Then *cry*," Sousuke commanded.

Makoto gasped, putting his hands on Sousuke's shoulders to try and pry him off.

"S-Sousuke—"

"Get it all out. Lay out your burdens," Sousuke said. "Don't just hold it all in, for crying out loud!"

"But—"

"No one is going to judge you or think you're weak!" Sousuke growled, shoving Makoto's head further into his shoulder. He felt Makoto grip onto his shirt and he squeezed Makoto tighter, his voice softening as he spoke again. "Think of yourself for once, you idiot."

He heard Makoto inhale sharply, his chest stuttering and shoulders shaking. After a few quivering

breaths, Makoto finally spoke.

"I *miss them."*

With a shuddering breath, Makoto finally said the words aloud that he had been thinking for *months*.

He reached up to grip the back of Sousuke's shirt and buried his face into his shoulder, the cries taking control of his body and making his shoulders jump with each sob.

"I m-miss them, s-so… *so much,"* Makoto cried.

Sousuke ran his fingers through Makoto's hair, feeling as his shoulder was getting soaked with tears.

"I know, Makoto," Sousuke said softly. He held Makoto closer to his chest, feeling his own eyes start to sting. "I *know."*

Haru placed a box down next to the pantry door, heaving a heavy sigh and wiping his brow. Of course he had to unload the truck when they contained the dry ingredients. The boxes were *heavy*.

How in the world did Tachibana carry these two at a time? Haru thought, almost bitterly as his arms protested.

"Phew!" came a voice next to him. Two boxes were placed down on either side of his.

Haru looked up to see both Nagisa and Rei standing to their feet and wiping their brows.

"These boxes are heavy!" Nagisa said.

Rei took off his glasses to wipe the sweat marks from the lenses.

"Indeed. My arms are going to ache for days," Rei said as he placed his glasses securely over his nose.

Haru stood up from the ground and looked at both of his friends levelly.

"Thank you for helping me with this. I know it was last notice," Haru said to them.

"Oh, not at all, Haruka-san!" Rei said with a smile.

"Yeah, yeah! It was no trouble at all, Haru-chan!" Nagisa chirped, standing tall with his hands on his hips. "And besides, we're all done now. You did the right thing by calling us to help."

"Yes, it would've been quite the hassle for you to do it by yourself," Rei said, looking at all of the boxes. "It's amazing that Tachibana-san was able to unload all of these by himself and still get all of his work done."

Haru's heart stung at the mention of his employee's name. He bit his lip and lowered his gaze to the floor.

"It's a shame Mako-chan's sick," Nagisa said.

"Yes, it is. I wonder if it's a cold," Rei pondered, bringing a hand to his chin.

"Or the flu?" Nagisa asked.

Haru's hands curled into fists by his sides.

He remembered his wide green eyes as he stared off into space, his frame shaking and breaths coming in short.

It was no cold, Haru thought. *That was a panic attack.*

Suddenly, there were a few faint knocks coming from the front of the restaurant.

"Oh, goodness. We're not even open, yet," Rei said in a frustrated whisper. He adjusted his glasses and excused himself from the pantry area, heading out to the front door.

"It was kind of surprising that Mako-chan asked for a day off," Nagisa said softly, his foot nudging a corner of one of the boxes.

Haru hummed, remembering the phone call he had received a few hours after Tachibana had left. His voice had sounded hoarse and weak, frail and fragile… something that did not suit the tall brown-haired man.

"He just needed rest," Haru suggested, trying to convince himself.

"Mmn," Nagisa hummed. He smiled softly but his eyes betrayed how worried he truly was. "You're probably right."

Suddenly, Rei rushed around the corner, his eyes a little wide.

"Um, Haruka-san," Rei called. "There's… well, someone is here to—"

"I'm here to talk."

Haru glanced up to see a familiar tall man with teal eyes walk into the room. But instead of sporting his usual, brooding scowl, his features were softer and strained.

But seeing his face still made Haru's blood boil.

"Yamazaki," Haru greeted, surprised that he could even remember his name.

"Nanase," Yamazaki greeted back. His teal eyes cut to Rei and Nagisa before landing back on Haru. "I need to talk to you. Privately."

Haru's brow rose suspiciously and Yamazaki sighed, his hand reaching back to scratch his head.

"It's about Makoto," Yamazaki added.

Haru's heart leapt in his chest, his eyes blowing wide. He was about to open his mouth to ask if he was okay but stopped when he realized that Nagisa and Rei were still there. He glanced back to the door that led to the truck offloading.

"Let's go out here and talk. Nagisa, Rei, watch the restaurant while we're gone," Haru commanded.

He did not wait to see their responses. Instead, he quickly turned away from Yamazaki and led them through the door to the truck offloading room, shutting the door behind them. He turned around from the door and faced Yamazaki, who had his arms folded across his chest.

"Well," Haru said, leaning against the doorway. "What is it you wanted to talk about?"

Yamazaki's posture suddenly stiffened, his face twisting into an expression Haru had not seen before.

"Makoto is… well, he's…" Yamazaki's lips twisted and he glanced up at the ceiling, his fingers digging into his biceps. "I'm worried about him."

Haru's brows furrowed. "Worried?"

Yamazaki lowered his head to look back down at Haru, looking somewhat surprised that he actually got a response. He lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck, his eyes flitting around the room.

"Yeah. I came here to check up on him and his siblings to make sure that he was doing okay since the accident," Yamazaki said. "But he's been stressing himself out lately."

Haru's stomach flipped and then filled with nervous butterflies.

Accident? Haru thought. *What accident?*

He thought of the weird scar on the back of Tachibana's head, the constant headaches and faintings…

Had Tachibana been in some kind of accident recently?

"Just a headache."

"Do you get those often?"

"No. They started last year."

Haru bit his lip and kept that piece of information in the back of his mind. If Tachibana had not said anything to him about it, then it must not be something that he wanted to talk about. He turned his gaze back to Yamazaki and softened his face.

"He does seem a little… tense," Haru admitted.

"And you're still letting him work all these hours?" Yamazaki asked.

Haru's pulse spiked at the familiar question and he cut his eyes up at Yamazaki, letting his brows lower over his eyes.

"He *asked* for them," Haru said. "He said he was looking for a second job anyway. This just makes it more convenient for him."

Yamazaki seemed to ponder over his words, his expression remaining neutral and unreadable. When he huffed out a breath and shrugged, Haru calmed himself.

"Yeah. So he told me," Yamazaki said.

Haru blinked at him in shock.

Where was the threatening man that he had met just earlier this week?

"Listen," Yamazaki started, his hand coming up to rub his head again. "I'm only off for a few days

and I have to leave on Friday to go out of the country. I won't be around to help him calm down from his stress."

A crease formed in between Haru's brows and he tilted his head. Is Tachibana's stress really that bad?

What had happened to his childhood friend?

"I originally wanted to drop everything, my job, my title... and come here to help him out but he refuses my help. He says he wants to do things on his own," Yamazaki said, and Haru could sense the bitterness in his voice. "But for some odd reason, he seems to listen to you. And he trusts you."

Haru's eyes widened.

Did he tell Yamazaki that? He thought, allowing himself to be a little selfish.

"So I'm asking for a favor from you," Yamazaki said.

Haru tilted his head, meeting Yamazaki's eyes with a skeptical expression. What kind of favor would he be asking?

"And what favor would that be?" Haru asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Yamazaki took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment before he unfolded his arms and looked at Haru with a pleading expression.

"Watch out for him," Yamazaki said softly. He bowed his head, making Haru flinch back in surprise. "I'm asking you to please keep your eyes on him and make sure he doesn't get hurt. *Please."*

Haru's breath caught in his throat, his heart hammering away inside his chest. He could hear the conviction in Yamazaki's voice and see it in the way his shoulders trembled.

Maybe Yamazaki isn't really cruel, Haru thought. *Maybe he's just concerned for his friend.*

Haru remembered how much Tachibana–no, *Makoto*–had cried in the hospital after he fell into the river. That was Makoto expressing how much he had cared for Haru. So maybe... maybe this was how Yamazaki cared for his friend. His way of expressing it was just... different.

Haru sighed, feeling relieved and actually thankful that Makoto had a friend like this all these years.

"You have my word," Haru said to Yamazaki. "I promise to watch out for him."

Yamazaki lifted his head and looked at Haru, surprise obvious in his eyes. He blinked a few times before looking away, his cheeks turning a hint of red as his eyes shined.

"Thank you, Nanase."

"Mmn. You're welcome, Yamazaki."

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to check out my Tumblr for any updates or info regarding my fics. Ask me a question if you'd like!

Go on

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!
Another chapter for you! Sorry if I haven't gotten back to your comments, yet. This week has been busy!

Thank you, Tayu-chan, for another fabulous editing job ^^

Also, if you guys like listening to music while you read – I'm a huge lover of music – check this out while reading this chapter.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Haru slumped in the tub, letting the water rise to just under his nose. The steam had dissipated ages ago, leaving the bath water cold and refreshing. It was like taking a dip in a nice swimming pool, but without the harsh smell of chlorine interfering with his eyes.

He needed this time to reflect and cool down his head from the crazy week he had.

"Watch out for him."

Haru wrapped his arms around his bare knees and pulled his legs flush with his torso.

"I'm asking you to please keep your eyes on him and make sure he doesn't get hurt. Please."

He glanced across the room and shifted slightly, feeling the light slosh of the bath water against his upper lip.

"I, uh… I'm probably going to take more days off. Is… is that okay, Nanase-san?"

Haru blew out bubbles in the tub, remembering that phone call he received the day Yamazaki came in to speak with him. Tachibana had requested more time off—a few more days to rest and recuperate.

Haru had wanted to ask him *Recuperate from what?* But the words never left his mouth. Tachibana's hoarse and quivering voice made him feel queasy enough to just let it go.

There was also the other thing that Yamazaki had mentioned…

"Yeah. I came here to check up on him and his siblings to make sure that he was doing okay since the accident."

Haru had wracked brain all week in Tachibana's absence poring over every memory he had of his childhood friend. There was one thing that he could remember, but that was long ago when Yamazaki was not even in the picture.

Haru's eyes flitted up to the opposite end of the tub, his gaze landing on the faucet on the tub.

Hanging around it was a little blue dolphin attached to a keychain. Its colors had faded and one of the fins had bent, but he still had it. Haru still kept it after all these years.

"C'mon, Haru-chan! We should go to this booth over here!"

"Okay, just slow down, Makoto."

"Oops. Sorry!"

Makoto shyly waited for his companion to catch up, his green yukata practically swallowing his tiny body alive. He scratched his cheek as Haru got closer.

"Sorry, Haru-chan," Makoto apologized again.

"It's fine," Haru said. "What did you want to look at?"

Makoto glanced up at the well-lit festival booth, its bright red and orange colors sparkling in his green eyes.

"This one looks fun!" Makoto said, pointing up at the booth.

Haru glanced at it, reading the sign that read "Ring Toss."

"Ring toss?" Haru asked. "This game is kind of hard, isn't it?"

Makoto rubbed the back of his neck, his eyebrows upturning a little nervously. But he kept a wobbly smile on his face and glanced back to the booth.

"I think it could be fun," Makoto said.

"Don't you want to try the goldfish scooping instead?" Haru asked, glancing back to that booth behind them.

Makoto followed his gaze to the goldfish booth, his lips parting slightly. Haru noticed that he looked incredibly sad all of a sudden, like he was about to burst into tears any minute.

"Makoto?" Haru called, concern in his voice.

Makoto snapped out of his reverie and faced Haru with a dull expression on his face. When he realized he had not said anything, he blinked rapidly and then looked away with a light blush on his face.

"Sorry. I spaced out," Makoto apologized rigidly. He swallowed audibly. "I've tried that game before but… I could never win anything. And then, someone gave me some as a present and then…"

Makoto's voice trailed off when his eyes looked at the ground. He shook his head a few times before looking back at Haru with a weird smile.

"Besides… I want to win something for Haru-chan," Makoto said.

Haru's brows pushed together. "Why? I don't need anything."

Makoto suddenly looked stricken, his eyes turning sad and frantic.

"W-Well… you decided not to join the swim club because of me," Makoto mumbled. "I feel that it's my fault."

Haru's brows pushed together in confusion.

"What are you talking about, Makoto?" Haru asked.

Makoto looked uncomfortable, his eyes glancing around the festival lights, his eyes shining. He huffed out a breath and his hands gripped into the fabric of his yukata.

"Remember that bad storm that hit a little while ago?" Makoto asked, his voice tight.

Haru nodded. How could he forget? Makoto still flinched at every crack of thunder when a storm popped up.

"Well… there was this fisherman I knew," Makoto continued, his eyes flitting over to look at the goldfish booth. "He was the one who gave me the goldfish."

Haru stared at the goldfish booth, feeling his lips twist slightly. He would have gotten Makoto fish if he had asked for them.

"D-During that storm… the fisherman's boat sank," Makoto said, making Haru snap his head back towards him. "He… everyone died and…"

Makoto's voice choked a little as he spoke and Haru reached forward to latch onto Makoto's sleeve. How had he not known this? Where was he?

"They had a seaside funeral for everyone who died that day. I… I went to your house to see if you wanted to come but… you weren't home," Makoto said.

Haru's eyes widened. He was not home that day?

"Did you go all by yourself?" Haru asked, feeling a little guilt sit in his stomach.

Makoto nodded, and the guilt sank deeper.

"Ever since then, I've been too scared to go in the water. But…"

Oh, so that was why Makoto refused to go swimming every time Haru asked him to. He always knew Makoto was hiding something about it but he could never figure it out until now. It all made sense now.

The tears that had brimmed in Makoto's eyes started to slip out and down his cheeks. He looked up at Haru with such conviction that Haru thought his heart would burst.

"But Haru-chan loves swimming! A-And I'm making you sad by not letting you swim because you're too busy worrying about what I want to do," Makoto said, sniffling.

Haru let go of Makoto's sleeve and grabbed his hand instead, making Makoto's cries suddenly stop. He looked at Haru in surprise.

"I'm not sad," Haru said. "It doesn't bother me that we don't go swimming."

Makoto blinked a few times, the last of his tears sliding down his cheeks.

"It doesn't?" Makoto asked.

"Of course not," Haru said. "We can always do something else."

Makoto's face lit up like a bright light and he scrubbed his face with his arms. He then pumped his fists and turned to the booth.

"Okay, Haru-chan! I'm going to win you that prize now!" Makoto said.

Haru blinked at him and then a small smile appeared on his face.

"I already told you. I don't need anything," Haru said.

"Yeah, but I want to anyway!"

"Don't do things on your own. Dummy Makoto."

Haru leaned closer to the worn out dolphin keychain, the precious prize that his childhood friend had won for him that day. After all of middle school, high school, college and moving to the city, that keychain stayed with him in the hope that he would run into the boy that had once saved his life.

And now that he finally met him again, literally running into him on the street, it turned out that his best friend does not even remember who he is.

Haru sighed and flicked the dolphin, watching it swing back and forth against the white tile of the bathtub.

"Dummy Makoto."

"Are you sure you got enough rest?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure you want to go back to work today?"

"Yes, Sousuke. I've been gone too many days already."

"Maybe I should call my coach and—"

"Sousuke."

"Fine, fine."

Sousuke stood in front of Makoto on the train platform, his bag in his hand. He was staring hard at Makoto, his eyes nearly piercing into Makoto's soul, and Makoto was staring back with bloodshot eyes and a small, tired smile.

"I'm really okay, Sousuke," Makoto said.

Sousuke's eyes narrowed a little and he sighed heavily. He leaned forward so the twins, who were nearby, would not hear.

"You didn't look okay last night," Sousuke whispered seriously.

Makoto's smile fell and he winced, his eyes throbbing in their sockets. He blinked and glanced

down at his and Sousuke's shoes, avoiding eye contact.

Every night since his breakdown, he had buried his face in Sousuke's shoulder and cried. He made sure to hold it in until the twins went to bed before he would let it all out, his hands clutching and clawing at Sousuke's shirt.

But then, after each breakdown, Sousuke would help him clean his parents' shrines and some nights, they burned some incense. It truly seemed that Makoto had not had enough time to grieve and Sousuke was the one to push it past the edge.

Makoto was grateful that Sousuke pushed him, but the hole in his chest had never felt heavier.

It was almost unbearable.

"What's going to happen with the twins?" Sousuke asked, his eyes flicking to see Ran and Ren sitting on the nearby bench.

Ren was apparently trying to teach Ran how to draw but she was failing at it. It was a calm sight to see but it still did not settle the uncomfortable squirm in Makoto's stomach. He was strapped for time on getting a new apartment, and he could not tell Sousuke this or he would give up everything he had worked for just for him and the twins. It would not be right.

"I'm not sure," Makoto finally answered, his eyes still trained on the twins. "They're getting along better than they have in a long time, so I'm grateful for that."

Sousuke's head turned back to look at him with a soft expression.

"Have you heard anything from Social Services?" Sousuke asked, his brows quirking upward a little.

Makoto felt some sweat sliding down his neck.

"No, not… not since the phone call earlier this week," Makoto answered.

"Hmm," Sousuke hummed, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. He turned his head to look at the tracks, his eyes looking hesitant and almost reluctant.

"You don't have to worry, Sousuke," Makoto said.

Sousuke eyed him with a level stare and he clicked his tongue, looking more annoyed than before.

"I know I don't *have* to, idiot," Sousuke said. He reached up to run his fingers through his hair and Makoto smiled a little, feeling a bit guilty.

"Sorry," Makoto apologized.

Sousuke's face scrunched up almost pitifully as he stared into Makoto's eyes once again, almost pleadingly.

"Are you *sure* you don't want me to stay?" Sousuke asked. "Because I can quit the team. I can find a job and help you with—"

"Sousuke."

Sousuke's mouth snapped shut at Makoto's interruption, staring at him with wide, expectant eyes. Makoto looked back at him with his signature head-tilt smile and his face soft and fond.

"Go live your dream," Makoto told him. "You deserve it."

Sousuke sucked in a harsh breath and bit his lip. He grit his teeth and glared sadly at the ground with his hands curling into tight fists.

Makoto sighed softly and stepped forward, wrapping his arms around Sousuke's stiff shoulders, drawing out a choked sigh from his friend.

"Thank you, Sousuke," Makoto said, and Sousuke choked again. "For everything."

Sousuke dropped his bag from his hand reached up to clutch onto Makoto's shirt.

"Idiot," Sousuke said under his breath. "You big idiot."

Makoto huffed out a laugh to prevent the tears from spilling out of his own eyes.

"Mmn, I know," Makoto agreed.

He squeezed Sousuke harder, feeling more and more thankful for befriending him all those years ago. He was almost reluctant to let him get on that train. He did not want to see his best friend go. But he knew that Sousuke had finally reached his goal after all the heartache and doctors visits and physical therapy sessions. It had been a tough road but Sousuke had finally done it.

And Makoto did not want to stand in his way.

"Attention: Train arriving at the station. Please stand back."

Sousuke and Makoto broke out of their embrace at the announcement and they glanced at the tunnel opening to see the train entering the station slowly.

Sousuke quickly wiped off his eyes with his sleeve and leaned down to grab his bag while the twins hopped off the bench and walked over.

"Well, don't think you're off the hook with all of this," Sousuke said. His face was stuck in his usual scowl but his eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, making his strong demeanor less threatening. Makoto wanted to laugh but he knew how serious Sousuke was.

"I know," Makoto said, reaching up to grip Sousuke's shoulder. "Have a safe trip."

Sousuke hesitated and then finally broke into a small smile, also reaching up with his hand to grasp Makoto's shoulder.

"Yeah. I will."

Sousuke gave Makoto's shoulder one final squeeze before letting go and turning around to board the train. Before he could take one more step, however, Makoto remembered something that Sousuke had told him a few days ago.

"Oh, wait, Sousuke!" Makoto called, making Sousuke stop and turn around. "You said you were going out of the country, right?"

"Yeah, for about a month. Training with another team," Sousuke said.

"Oh. What country is it again?" Makoto asked.

Sousuke tugged his bag over his shoulder and gave Makoto a small smile.

"Australia."

When Makoto walked the twins to their school, he sent them off with tight hugs and asking them to watch out for each other. They hugged back, Ran even promising to watch out for Ren throughout the day. It eased the slight tension in Makoto's chest.

He walked back the one block to the restaurant and entered with a sigh on his lips, praying that there would be no troubles at his shift today. He went straight to the back room to start unloading the truck.

When he walked through the doorway to the back room, he immediately spotted Nanase attempting to pick up two boxes at once. His legs wobbled as he stepped away from the truck, not noticing the stray mop lying on the ground.

"Oh, Nanase-san! Watch out!" Makoto called, but he was a little too late. Nanase stepped on the mop and faltered, his body leaning to one side.

Makoto rushed down the steps and ran to Nanase's side, grabbing the boxes with one hand and steadying Nanase's shoulder with the other. Nanase panted a little and then glanced up at Makoto with wide eyes.

"Are you okay?" Makoto asked him, taking one of the boxes from him. "That was close."

Nanase blinked at him for a moment, pausing to catch his breath.

"I'm fine. Thank you," Nanase said. "But I can do truck today if you're still unwell."

Makoto's brows rose to his forehead and then he smiled softly.

"Thanks, but I'm feeling a lot better now," Makoto assured. "I can handle this if you have work to do."

Nanase hesitated, unwilling to move from his spot as he shifted his weight between his feet.

"If you're sure…" Nanase said. He finally moved forward, the box still in his hands, and Makoto followed him up the stairs and into the kitchen.

"You don't even have to do your second shift today, if you don't want to," Nanase said as he placed the box down.

Makoto smiled at his offer. "No, no. I've been slacking off long enough. I'll do the long shift."

Nanase seemed hesitant again but then nodded, his brows creased slightly.

"Okay," he said. "Just let me know if you're not feeling well."

Makoto smiled and nodded.

"You got it."

Haru watched Tachibana carefully throughout both of his shifts. He had finished unloading the truck at a decent time and remembered everything on the menu when he took the customers' orders, but his shoulders looked heavy and dark circles sat underneath his eyes. He looked haggard, the smile on his face struggling to stay wide enough.

Haru's hands twitched at his sides, his mixing bowl forgotten.

Something happened, Haru thought. *Something happened while he was gone.*

But… what?

At that moment, Tachibana slipped through the door into the kitchen and grabbed a tray, placing the prepared meals on top of it. Haru noticed that his smile was nowhere in sight behind closed doors, but as soon as he pushed the door open to the restaurant floor, that strained smile appeared back on his face.

Haru wondered if Tachibana was pushing himself too hard. Maybe he should have made him go home today, as well.

He passed on his mixing bowl to a nearby chef, mumbling a quick "here," and then he quickly fled the kitchen. Once he was on the restaurant floor, he glanced around to try and find his fatigued employee but his eyes were drawn to a movement out of the corner of his eye.

Ran had just exited the bathroom and she was heading to the break room door. She opened the break room door and disappeared inside.

Haru glanced out at the restaurant floor, seeing Tachibana delivering food to a large table. Haru sighed. His talk with Tachibana would have to wait.

But… his siblings were probably free.

He moved the opposite direction of Tachibana and entered through the break room door, the two siblings sitting at the same table as they always do. Ran had a textbook open on the table, her hand scribbling furiously on some notebook paper. Ren, on the other hand, was completely still. His head was hanging pitifully as he stared at some piece of paper in his lap.

After a deep breath, Haru approached them, lifting up his hand in greeting.

"Hey," Haru started, trying his best to sound casual.

The twins looked up and their eyes widened, Ran's smile almost blinding.

"Hi, Nanase-san!" Ran chirped.

"Hello," Ren greeted with a slight nod of his head.

"I haven't seen you in a few days," Haru said, taking a seat next to Ren.

"Mmn, Onii-chan hasn't been feeling well," Ren said, hanging his head.

Haru's lips twisted. "And how is he doing now?"

"He seemed a lot better this morning," Ran said, tapping the end of her pencil against her cheek. "I mean, I think he was sad when Sousuke-nii-chan left this morning, but he was smiling so I don't know."

Haru felt his heart flip and his eyes widened a little. Yamazaki was not here?

"He left?" Haru asked.

"Yeah, he went back on the train this morning," Ren answered.

"Mmn. But Onii-chan looked happy," Ran added. "It was nice to have Sousuke-nii-chan here!"

Haru wanted to pout, a strange flicker of jealousy in his chest. He turned his gaze to Ren, noticing he was still staring at the paper in his lap.

"What's wrong, Ren?" Haru said, deciding to steer the subject away from Yamazaki.

Ren jumped a little, his head leaning up to peer at Haru with a sheepish expression. He swallowed and then handed the paper over to Haru.

Haru took the paper with gentle fingers and looked it over. It appeared to be an assignment sheet for the art club. Everyone in the club had to create a piece to submit for the upcoming winter festivities. There would also be a contest for the most unique and original artwork, the winner's piece to be on display in the front entrance as guests enter.

It seemed simple enough, but Haru knew that it was probably making Ren nervous.

"Do you have an idea in mind for what you want to create?" Haru asked him.

Ren pursed his lips, his brows scrunching up as he sat in silent deliberation. After a minute or two, he turned to Haru with worried brows.

"I was thinking that I'd like to do a painting," Ren said.

Haru's brows lifted. "A painting? Do you know what kind of painting?"

Ren struggled with himself for a minute, his fingers twisting in his lap.

"Um… Maybe acrylic or pastel…" Ren said.

I have tons of those at home, Haru thought.

"Have you ever worked with those paints before?" Haru asked.

Ren averted his eyes and shrugged a little. "At school," he answered.

"But not at home?" Haru asked.

Ren suddenly looked embarrassed as he shook his head, his shoulders rising up, and Haru wondered if Ren even had those paints at home.

"Do you… have the supplies?" Haru asked, his voice softer.

Ren paused, his hand scratching his cheek.

"I have some pastel paint samples," he answered. "There isn't a lot of each color but I have a lot of colors."

Haru hummed thoughtfully and his eyes traveled down to the paper in his hands again to study over it. The project was due very soon, and time was quickly running out. And with the weekend starting tomorrow, Haru would not see Ren for a few days to help. Ren would be stuck all weekend without any direction on how to start on his painting.

Haru took a breath through his nose and looked up at Ren seriously.

"Do you want me to come over to help you tonight?" Haru asked.

Ren snapped his head up to look at Haru with wide eyes and a dropped jaw.

"R-Really?!" Ren asked.

Haru shrugged. "Why not? I can show you some tricks that you can practice over the weekend so you can get started on it."

Ren's eyes seemed to sparkle, and even Ran was bouncing in her seat.

"That would be great!" Ren said, almost shouting.

"Yes, please come over!" Ran asked, leaning over the table.

Haru managed a small smile. "We'd have to ask your brother first."

"Ask me what?"

The three of them turned their heads to see Tachibana standing in the doorway to the break room, his tie crooked and sleeves wrinkled *again*. Haru felt his brow twitch at the sad sight.

"Onii-chan, can Nanase-san come over to help me with my art project?" Ren asked, sitting up in his chair.

Tachibana blinked a few times, his gaze turning to lock with Haru's eyes.

"Eh? Art project?" Tachibana asked.

"Please? He wants to teach me how to use paints," Ren said. "Please, Onii-chan?"

"Yeah! It'll be fun!" Ran chirped.

Tachibana gave her a crooked smile and looked to Haru.

"Well, only if Nanase-san is okay with that, then I'm fine with it," he said.

The twins' eyes lit up like fireworks and they cheered. Tachibana's lips widened into a big smile, his face looking brighter than it had been all night.

Haru pinched the assignment paper in between his fingers, a small smile tugging on the corners of his lips.

"I can't wait to see more of Nanase-san's art skills!" Ran said, walking alongside Nanase on the darkened sidewalk.

"Mmn," Ren hummed and nodded with a small smile.

"The apartment might be a bit messy," Makoto said to Nanase sheepishly. "I didn't get a chance to tidy up after Sousuke left."

"I don't mind," Nanase said seriously. "Thank you for the invitation."

Makoto smiled and nodded. "Of course. I'm just glad you're willing to help Ren out." He glanced down to ruffle Ren's hair.

Nanase managed a small smile at the gesture and hummed.

"I was in the art club when I was in school," Nanase said.

The twins gaped up at him.

"Really?" Makoto asked.

Nanase nodded. "They didn't have any kind of cooking club at my school so I chose art instead."

"Wow! It's no wonder you're so good!" Ran exclaimed. "You're being taught by a professional, Ren!"

"I'm not sure being in a club for a few years considers me a professional," Nanase deadpans.

"Close enough!" Ran chirped happily.

Nanase huffed out a breath and Makoto whipped his head to peer at him. Had Nanase laughed again? But when Nanase's head turned towards him in curiosity, his face was neutral and relaxed.

Makoto pouted and turned his head away. He was determined to catch Nanase laughing one of these days.

They finally reached their small apartment complex and ascended the stairs, the twins keeping the conversation going with Nanase. When they reached the right door, Makoto pulled out his keys and unlocked the apartment.

But once he swung open the door, he froze.

The apartment was dark and freezing cold.

"Huh?" Makoto peeped, looking round the darkened apartment.

"What's wrong with the lights, Onii-chan?" Ren asked, glancing around the dark apartment.

Makoto blinked rapidly as he entered, trying to adjust his eyes to the dark. He touched the light switch on the side and tried to flick it back and forth but nothing changed. The apartment remained dark and eerily quiet.

"I… I'm not sure," Makoto answered.

"Is the power out?" Ran asked, suddenly next to him.

"No," Nanase said from the hall.

Everyone turned towards the doorway to see him looking up at the hallway ceiling. The hallway was well lit and bright, not a hint of any power outages on the rest of the floor.

"The lights are on in the hall," Nanase stated, his head turning back to them. His faced morphed into a wince. "Did you happen to… maybe forget to pay the utility bill?"

Makoto's heart plummeted into his stomach and he whirled around, scurrying off into the kitchen. He pulled out his phone and used the screen as a light to guide him to the counter. He fumbled around until his hands found the scattered mail that had gathered from the past week.

He flipped through all of the envelopes until he saw a few that had the word OVERDUE in large, red characters on the front.

Makoto groaned slumped forward on the counter, letting his forehead bonk on the cold surface.

Of course.

Of course this would happen at a time like this.

"What is it, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, her head poking around the kitchen entryway.

Makoto heaved a heavy sigh against the counter and then pushed himself up, turning to look back at her. Ren was standing next to her and Nanase remained at the front door, the lights from the hallway spilling into the living room. Makoto sighed and picked up all of the mail, leading the twins back into the living room.

"Ah, well… it seems Nanase-san was right," Makoto said as he shook the stack of envelopes in the air. His ears were *burning*. "I, uh… forgot to send a few checks."

"Eh?!" Ran and Ren exclaimed at the same time.

"Does this mean we don't have heat?" Ren asked.

"Or water?" Ran asked.

Makoto hummed, reaching back to rub the back of his neck.

"I guess not," Makoto said sheepishly. "Sorry, guys."

"What are we going to do?" Ren asked, his voice wobbly. "It's really dark."

"And I could really use a shower…" Ran mumbled.

Makoto grimaced, his hand stilling on his neck. His eyes flitted to the floor, watching as Nanase's shadow shifted slightly in the doorway. His boss had recently seen him at his worst and he wanted to sink into the floor.

"Sorry," Makoto apologized again, avoiding their eyes.

This had turned into a complete disaster. How would he explain this to the twins? That he was too preoccupied with grieving to pay attention to the bills that had started piling up? That he shirked on his responsibilities?

Makoto winced. Who knew that taking one second to be a little selfish, a little self-indulgent, could make matters worse for everyone else. He should have never let his guard down. He should never have stopped going to work. He should have—

"Stay at my place."

Makoto's thoughts derailed and he glanced up to see Nanase staring back at him with his usual deadpan expression.

"Eh? Your place, Nanase-san?" Ran asked, looking up at him with hope gleaming in her eyes.

"Yeah," Nanase said as he turned his head down to her. "I don't live too far away and I've got two free bedrooms…"

"Really?" Ren asked, his voice lilting.

"Mmn," Nanase hummed. "I also have more art supplies there, too, if you want to look at them, Ren."

Ren's eyes blew wide and he made a surprised noise. He turned back to Makoto and looked up at him, his hand touching Makoto's side.

"Can we go, Onii-chan?" Ren asked.

Makoto blinked at him, surprised that he was willing to ask.

"Yeah! Can we go, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, turning back to Makoto. Even in the dark, he could tell that she had a smile on her face.

Makoto looked between the both of them and then glanced up at Nanase, who remained still in the doorway. His expression remained neutral but it looked more open and soft, almost inviting.

"Nanase-san…" Makoto whispered in awe. He immediately lifted up his hand and waved it in the air frantically. "We couldn't possibly intrude on your home! We… we really don't want to impose."

Nanase shrugged. "You're not," he said simply. "I have the space and… it's supposed to get really cold this weekend. Stay at my place until the check goes in for your utilities."

Makoto blinked at him, surprised. He glanced down at the twins, noticing their curious faces, and then back up to Nanase.

"Are you… are you sure?" Makoto asked.

Nanase nodded and hummed, his face unchanging. And Makoto released a breath, scratching his cheek with his free hand.

"Well, um… I guess if it's all right with you, then…" Makoto said with a sheepish smile. He glanced down at the twins. "Ran, Ren, go pack for a few days. Don't forget a toothbrush."

The twins' eyes lit up like a bright spark in the dark apartment and they exchanged excited looks before rushing down the hallway to their bedroom.

Makoto sighed and his head fell forward as his shoulders sagged. It was always one thing after another.

"It's really no trouble," Nanase said to break the silence. Makoto glanced up at him.

"Now, hurry up and pack up your stuff, too," Nanase said as he turned towards the hallway. He stopped at the doorway and then glanced over his shoulder to peer at Makoto. "Oh, and don't forget your toothbrush."

Makoto paused before a huff of laughter escaped his throat, his chest fluttering. It made him feel the tiniest bit lighter.

"Yes, Boss," Makoto said with a small, crooked smile.

Nanase gave him a look before walking out into the hallway. Makoto chuckled again and then quickly gathered up his things, all of which fit into one backpack. He stuffed all of the bills in his bag with burning shame and slung the backpack over his shoulders.

Once the twins emerged from their bedrooms, their bags in their hands, Makoto called them to the hallway where Nanase was leaning against the wall.

"Ready?" Nanase asked as Makoto shut the apartment door behind him.

Makoto reached up to rub the back of his neck again, flinching when the raw skin protested. He glanced down at the twins, who were both looking up at him expectantly.

"Yeah," Makoto answered with a wobbly smile, and Nanase nodded in response.

"Follow me," he said, taking a step down the hallway.

Nanase led the three of them out of their apartment complex and down the darkened street. They headed towards the station where they huddled together on a cold, empty train. After two quick stops, Nanase led them out of the station and down a well-lit street surrounded by tall buildings. The atmosphere was a stark difference to the rundown part of the city where Makoto had found his apartment.

The rent around here must be incredibly expensive, Makoto thought wearily. The thought alone was enough to make him sweat, even in the frigid air.

"This is it," Nanase said suddenly.

Makoto blinked out of his thoughts and peered up, his jaw dropping.

The building was tall, reaching into the night sky like a tower. The windows along the sides were shiny and pristine with the lights from the city reflecting off of it like mirrors.

"Wow," Ren said in astonishment.

"This building is huge," Ran said softly.

Makoto swallowed, suddenly feeling underdressed. He briefly worried about anything expensive that Nanase would have in his home. What if the twins broke something? Or what if *he* broke something? His empty wallet suddenly felt heavier in his pocket.

"Let's go," Nanase said as he swiped a card at the keypad beside the front doors.

Makoto took a deep breath and followed after Nanase, his legs feeling like jelly and his heart rising into his throat. They walked into the elevator along the side of the entryway and Nanase pressed the number 48.

Makoto's hands clutched onto the straps of his backpack as the elevator shifted and then lifted them up the several floors at lightning speed. He felt a body push against him and glanced down to see Ren, noticing that he was mimicking the same habits, his knuckles going white with how hard he was crushing the straps of his backpack.

Finally, the elevator came to a stop and Nanase led them down the hallway until they came to a stop at a door. Nanase pulled out his keys and unlocked the door.

"I'll show you the bedrooms. Make yourself at home," Nanase said as he toed off his shoes.

The three siblings entered and stood frozen at the genkan, their jaws dropping to the floor.

The apartment was huge; double, maybe even *triple* the size of Makoto's humble apartment. The room was open, the kitchen and living room all in one space. The windows touched the floor and rose all the way up to the ceiling, giving them a view of the bright city below. There was a hallway on the right, Nanase standing there expectantly. It must have led to the bedrooms and bathroom.

"Bedrooms are this way," Nanase said, tossing a thumb towards the hallway.

Makoto jolted out of his daze and then scrambled out of his shoes, the twins copying him. He stepped lightly on the shiny floors, his eyes wide as he studied the apartment. He walked to where Nanase stood and followed him down the hall.

"Bathroom is here," Nanase said, pointing to a closed door. "And there are the two bedrooms. There's a guest futon in one of them."

Makoto bowed his head slightly, a shaky smile on his face.

"Thank you, Nanase-san. You really didn't have to do all this," he said.

"It's no trouble," Nanase said, his voice soft. "And stop bowing already."

Makoto leaned up quickly and then turned to look at the twins.

"Ren, you and me can share this bedroom. Ran, why don't you take that one?" Makoto said.

Ran's face lit up. "I get my own room?!" she squealed.

Makoto smiled softly. "It only makes sense," he said. "Now, you both go ahead and get ready for bed. It's already late."

"B-But what about my project?" Ren asked, looking at Nanase with big eyes.

Nanase smiled gently at him, the sight making Makoto's heart feel warm.

"We can work on it tomorrow morning if you want. Since you'll be here for a few days, we can work on it together," Nanase said. "I have my own supplies here."

Ren's face lit up and he smiled, bowing to Nanase.

"Thank you, Nanase-san!" Ren said happily, and his gesture made Nanase frown.

"Stop bowing. You're just as bad as your brother," Nanase said.

Makoto snorted into his hand and then turned to the twins.

"All right. Off to bed!" Makoto commanded.

The twins pouted but they listened, heading off into their designated bedrooms to get ready for bed. Makoto followed Ren into their bedroom to set down his backpack and pull out the spare futon for himself, and then he left the room to let Ren change.

He headed out to the kitchen and saw Nanase at the stove, his hands busy making tea.

"Your apartment is really nice," Makoto said, looking around at the tall ceilings.

"Thank you," Nanase said without turning around. "I didn't want it so big, though. But my parents insisted I get this one."

Makoto heard the pitter-patter of feet down the hall and the bathroom door sliding open and shut. He scratched his cheek, thinking about those two extra bedrooms and the massive amount of space left.

"Um… do you have a roommate or anything?" Makoto asked carefully.

Nanase turned his head to look at him out of the corner of his eye and then hummed thoughtfully.

"No, I live alone," Nanase answered, turning back to grab some mugs from a nearby cabinet.

"Oh," Makoto said, a little touch of sadness in his voice. "That… that doesn't get lonely?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, he instantly regretted them. He was prying too much into his boss' life and asking way too personal of questions. But Makoto could not help himself. It was incredibly easy to talk to Nanase and he found himself comfortable around him.

Before he could spew any kind of apologies, Nanase was speaking.

"I'm used to it," Nanase said. "I'm an only child so I like the quiet."

Makoto smiled a little, feeling relief wash over him like a warm wave. He heard more pitter-pattering of feet and hummed.

"Yeah, I guess I can understand that. I was an only child for nearly ten years so it was pretty quiet for a while," Makoto said.

Nanase suddenly froze in his tracks and turned his head to look back at Makoto with abnormally wide eyes.

"Ten years?" Nanase echoed.

Makoto blinked at him and then folded his arms across his chest to think.

"Yeah, we lived in a small port town when I was a kid," Makoto explained, thinking back to that house on the hill that overlooked the ocean. It almost made him shudder but he held back. "The twins were born when I was around nine or ten, but we moved out of the area around then."

Nanase blinked at him rapidly and then tilted his head to look off into space. He looked contemplative but his eyes sparkled as if he just discovered something.

"I see," Nanase said finally as he turned back to the counter. He poured hot tea into the mugs and then grabbed them both, turning around and offering one to Makoto with his usual deadpan expression back on his face.

"Oh, thank you," Makoto thanked, taking the mug. They both walked into the living room, both standing side-by-side next to the tall windows that overlooked the shining city while their tea cooled.

After letting the mug warm his hands for a while, Makoto took a careful sip, the initial touch burning his lip. But the liquid soon flowed easily and made his belly and chest warm. He hummed at the taste as he pulled the mug away from his mouth. He smiled down at the cup, not surprised that his boss, the five-star chef, could make an excellent cup of tea.

"This is really good," Makoto said. "I don't think I've ever had something like this before."

There was a light red blush that tinted the skin underneath Nanase's eyes and he looked down at his own mug.

"There's a secret ingredient," Nanase said before he took a sip.

"Eh?" Makoto squeaked. "Secret ingredient? What is it?"

Nanase's eyes snapped up from his mug, giving Makoto a sharp look.

"If I told you, then it wouldn't be a secret anymore," Nanase said.

Makoto smiled playfully at the seriousness of Nanase's tone. He chuckled slightly and tilted his head to the side in a kind smile.

"But I won't be able to make it at home if I don't know how," Makoto pointed out.

Nanase lifted the mug up to cover his mouth and his head turned to look out the window.

"Guess you'll have to visit more often to get more," he said quietly.

Makoto's eyes blew wide, his heart throbbing at his sentence. Was that an invitation? It seemed much more casual than a simple boss-to-employee relationship. Did Nanase consider him… a friend?

Makoto opened his mouth to ask for clarity, wondering if that was what Nanase wanted, when his phone suddenly started to buzz in his pocket. He nearly dropped his tea in alarm and he scrambled to pull it out of his pocket. The screen was lit with a familiar name and it made Makoto's heart clench.

Sato.

"Excuse me," he whispered to Nanase before stepping away from the window. He answered the call with a tentative, "Hello?"

"Good evening, Tachibana-san."

Sato's voice was crystal clear on the other line and a chill trickled down his spine. Whenever she called, it always sent his blood pressure spiking.

"H-Hello, Sato-san. How can I help you?" Makoto greeted. He concentrated on the heat radiating from the mug in his free hand to try to calm himself.

"Well, I knew you had work this morning so I didn't want to call you in the middle of your shift. But I got a call from your landlord this morning," Sato said, making Makoto gulp. "You didn't pay your utility bills?"

Makoto's shoulders rose up to his ears defensively and his voiced cracked as he tried to explain.

"A-Ah, no, no! It wasn't on purpose," he stuttered out frantically. "I just forgot. I was going to send in the checks tomorrow, honest."

"I see," Sato said slowly. "So, are you going to stay in your apartment without heat or water? The temperatures are supposed to drop tonight."

"Oh, no. We're staying with…" Makoto glanced over his shoulder to see Nanase still looking out the window with his mug to his lips. "…A friend."

"A friend?" Sato asked.

"Yes," Makoto answered.

"What friend?"

Makoto bit his lip and held his breath.

"He's my boss, actually," Makoto admitted.

At the mention of his title, Nanase turned his head back to look at Makoto with slightly widened eyes.

"Oh, you mean the owner of the restaurant?" Sato asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Makoto answered, tearing his gaze away from Nanase's eyes.

"In a safe environment? Safe part of town?" Sato asked.

"Y-Yes. The complex is very secure," Makoto assured.

"And you trust him?"

Makoto nearly jumped at the sudden question, his mouth opening and shutting.

"Trust him?" Makoto asked.

"Your boss," Sato clarified. "Do you trust your boss?"

Makoto's eyes rose to meet Nanase's. His boss' shoulders were tight and his mouth was set in a straight line while his brows were slightly creased. His posture showed concern, something that he had seen in his boss a great number of times.

"Yes," Makoto answered easily. "I do trust him."

Sato stayed silent for a moment. There was not even the sound of scribbling on the other line this time.

"All right. I'll allow this for now," Sato said. "But if anything happens while you are staying there, it will not look good."

Makoto breathed shakily, the mug in his other hand trembling slightly.

"I understand," Makoto said.

"Good. Well, have a good evening, Tachibana-san."

"Mmn. You, too. Bye."

With a shaking thumb, Makoto pressed on the red button to end the call. He let out a long sigh as he pocketed his phone and lifted his empty hand to press against the warm mug. The warmth grounded him somewhat, almost forcing his hands to relax against the mug.

"Everything okay?"

Makoto's breath hitched in his chest and he turned his head back to see Nanase staring at him with that slight crease in between his brows. His mug had lowered down to his side, his fingers gracefully holding onto its edges.

"Ah," Makoto said intelligently, turning fully to face him. "Yeah. It's fine."

Nanase hesitated for a moment, his lips twisting to the side.

"Who was it?" he dared to ask.

Makoto bit his lip, wondering when this question would come up. He took a deep breath and tried for a smile.

"A Social Worker," he answered.

Nanase's face softened a bit, looking intrigued. "Social Worker?"

Makoto sucked in a sharp breath of air, the mug shaking in his hands. His smile remained tight on his lips but he could feel it start to crumble at the edges. He tried to swallow but his throat was dry and he lifted the cup up to his lips to take another swig, the hot tea sliding down his throat. His breath caught again and he choked on the hot tea, sputtering as he tried to expel the hot liquid from his lungs.

"Sorry," Nanase said, rushing to his side. He grabbed Makoto's mug from him and placed it down on the coffee table nearby and reached out a tentative hand to touch Makoto's back. "I overstepped."

"No," Makoto said with a raspy voice before he coughed again. "It's a reasonable… question."

Nanase waited patiently for him to recover, his hand awkwardly patting his back a few times during his coughing fit. Makoto cleared his throat a few times and then straightened his back to look down at Nanase.

"I mean… it must look odd… right?" Makoto asked, trying to smile.

Nanase's brows furrowed. "It's not odd. Just… unusual."

"Mmn," Makoto hummed, agreeing with his wording. He took a deep breath and lowered his gaze almost shamefully. His heart pounded heavily against his chest, making it ache with every beat. "I'm… I'm Ran and Ren's legal guardian."

Nanase paused, his hand falling away from Makoto's back. He almost missed the warmth it provided.

"Legal guardian?" he asked in a small voice.

Makoto lifted his gaze to look at Nanase, seeing the sadness in those blue eyes. It was almost as if Makoto did not need to say anything at all. Nanase already knew. It was written all over his face.

"Yeah. Our parents…"

A lump suddenly lodged itself in Makoto's throat and his eyes stung. He took a quivering breath and his hands curled into fists, turning his gaze to look at the floor. He felt flustered and scared, nervous about what Nanase would think.

Could he really do this? Could he really speak about it?

"They were your parents, too. You have every right to feel pain."

"Don't just hold it all in, for crying out loud!"

"No one is going to judge you or think you're weak!"

"Think of yourself for once, you idiot."

Makoto breathed through his nose, feeling the lump in his throat getting the slightest bit smaller. His smile fell from his face and he allowed his shoulders to sag under the weight of the burden he had been carrying.

He could do this.

"Our parents died in a car accident," Makoto explained, the sentence coming out smoother than he expected. "I took the twins in to be their guardian."

It was silent for a moment, and Makoto glanced up to peek at Nanase's face. His breath caught in his throat when he saw Nanase's upturned eyebrows and squinted eyes staring back at him. His blue eyes were even a bit shiny and it sent a spark of panic coursing through Makoto's veins. He had never seen such an expression on his boss' face before.

"When did this happen?" Nanase asked in a small voice, almost disbelievingly. It shook slightly and it made Makoto's heart pound faster.

Makoto bit his lip to steel his nerves. Another deep breath in…

"About eight months ago now, I think," Makoto said. "That's one of the reasons why Sousuke came to visit. He wanted to make sure I was doing okay."

Nanase looked at him sharply. "And are you?"

Makoto's eyes widened. "Hm?"

"Are you doing okay?"

Makoto opened his mouth to speak but his voice failed him, only a puff of air ghosting past his lips. He shut his mouth with a click and tried to swallow past the lump in his throat but it had grown larger again. He tried for a smile but it was weak and he could see the gentleness in Nanase's eyes.

After a moment, Nanase's expression relaxed and he looked up at Makoto with determined eyes. He suddenly looked ready for battle, as if he could conquer an army.

"I want to show you something," Nanase said suddenly. He abruptly turned from Makoto and walked towards the front door of the apartment. "Come with me," he called over his shoulder.

Makoto blinked rapidly, reeling at the sudden change in mood. He glanced at the hallway on the side and saw that the lights in both bedrooms were off, the apartment quiet and peaceful. With a deep breath, he managed to swallow the lump down past his throat and he hurried to follow Nanase.

"Put on a coat," Nanase said.

"E-Eh? Are we—"

"Don't worry. We're not leaving the building," Nanase said as he put his shoes on.

Makoto followed with a crease in between his brows. "Then why do I need my coat?"

Nanase looked at him as he put on his own jacket. "Because it'll be cold where we're going."

"*Eh?!*"

Nanase opened the front door of his apartment, gesturing for him to follow. Makoto glanced back into the apartment one last time, making sure he had not heard any signs of movement, and then he followed Nanase out into the hallway.

"Where are we going?" Makoto asked as they walked towards the elevators.

"You'll see," Nanase said simply.

Makoto's lips pulled into a slight pout, eliciting a quiet huff of air to leave Nanase's lips. Makoto's eyes widened and he leaned forward to try and see Nanase's face.

"Are you laughing at me?" Makoto asked as they entered an elevator.

Nanase turned his head away and his face remained neutral and deadpan.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, reaching forward to press the highest floor.

Makoto's eyes practically bulged from their sockets.

"W-Wait, why are we going to the top?!" Makoto asked, his voice cracking.

Nanase sighed and quirked a brow at him. "Do you always ask so many questions?"

"You can't just answer my question with a question," Makoto said.

"Why not?"

"E-Eh? Nanase-san!"

"What?"

Makoto sighed and reached up to rub his face. But his lips twitched into a small smile. Everything about this banter between the two of them made his chest feel incredibly warm and comfortable, as if he had been doing this his entire life.

The elevator jolted to a stop and the two of them stepped off into a dingy hallway. Nanase turned around a sharp corner that led to a doorway, the words *Stairs to Overlook* tacked on the door.

"This way," Nanase said, opening the door for him.

Makoto hesitated slightly, but the reassuring look on Nanase's face gave him the final push to step forward. They climbed the steps up a few more floors until they finally reached another door. Nanase opened it and a rush of frigid air swirled inside the stairwell, making Makoto squeak and snug his coat closer to his body.

Nanase walked through the doorway first and Makoto followed slowly, letting his body get used to the cold. Once he finally stepped through the door, his eyes widened in shock.

They were on the roof of the complex.

The bright lights of Tokyo lit up the night sky, the buildings stretching for miles across the horizon. The noise from the streets was muffled, making the atmosphere peaceful and surreal. It was as if they were looking at everything through a screen, watching the lives of people going without even knowing they were being watched.

"Over here."

Makoto turned to see Nanase on the left, his gloved hands resting on the edge of the safety wall. The air softly played with his black locks and made them brush against his forehead. His blue eyes seemed to shine even more brilliantly now, even in the dark.

Makoto stepped away from the doorway to stand by Nanase's side, taking in the sight from below. He was completely enraptured by the view from the top. Every muscle in his body tingled and his chest felt light as a feather.

He could have cried from relief.

"This is… beautiful," Makoto mentioned softly, his eyes glued to the city skyline.

Nanase hesitated for the briefest of seconds.

"Sometimes, when I'm feeling overwhelmed, I'll come up here," Nanase said.

Makoto tore his gaze from the city to look at Nanase, the lights reflecting off of his face and making him glow.

"When I first moved here, everything was so loud and crowded. I had wanted to give it up altogether and just go back home," Nanase continued.

Makoto's chest suddenly seized, feeling a strange sensation gnawing on his heart. If Nanase had not opened this restaurant, there was no telling where Makoto would be today.

He truly needed to thank Nanase for all of the trouble he put himself through just to get him this job.

"I talked about my anxiety with my father, and he recommended I look out my window to see 'the big picture,' or something—I never understood what he meant—but it wasn't enough. Looking out the window didn't help," Nanase said. "And one day, when I was feeling really overwhelmed, I decided to wander around the complex until I reached the roof."

Nanase paused to close his eyes for a moment and then he reopened them to stare out at the city.

"Everything looked smaller from here. And with the fresh air, I could clear my head," Nanase said. He pointed down at the city and Makoto followed his finger to gaze down at a few buildings that looked tiny from their viewpoint. "That's a local bakery and coffee shop. Next to it is the bank. And over there," Nanase pointed to another building, "is the train station where we came from earlier."

Makoto blinked, taking it all in. Everything truly looked so tiny.

"And when I realized how small everything looked, my problems and worries suddenly seemed so small," Nanase said. He leaned up from the wall and looked at Makoto with shining eyes. "I felt that I could overcome… anything."

Makoto's eyes widened at his words and he stopped breathing.

"I finally understood what my dad had meant. He wanted me to see that the way I was feeling was there for a reason," Nanase said. He looked out at the city. "The problems I was going through at the time was just part of the plan. I just couldn't see that because I was viewing my problems from down there."

Nanase pointed at the roads down below, Makoto following his finger once again.

"I was so consumed in my problems and worries that I couldn't see what else life had in store for me," Nanase continued. "I had to gain a different perspective to see the… the 'big picture.' Then, I finally found myself at peace because I could tell myself that these feelings would pass."

Nanase turned his gaze back to Makoto and they locked eyes, the cold wind brushing their air from their faces.

"I wanted to take you up here to show you that maybe what you're going through is… is something like a test. You can't see the outcome just yet, but…" Nanase took a deep breath and grounded himself, looking tall. "I know you can overcome it."

Makoto's heart suddenly flipped and his lungs ached. His eyes burned with fresh tears and he tore his gaze away from his boss to stare back at the city. His hands curled into fists as his body began to shake and he grit his teeth to prevent any sobs from escaping his raw throat.

While Sousuke had been the one to initiate his time of grieving, it was as if Nanase was there to help him begin his healing. It was as if someone told him that it was okay to let go, to move on. It was okay to miss his parents but it was also okay to smile, to laugh, to *live*.

It was as if everything that had been weighing him down suddenly lifted from his shoulders, his problems fluttering away in the breeze along with his falling tears.

And Makoto, for the first time in months, felt relief.

That heavy weight that had crushed his chest was finally removed, replaced by loving words and kindness.

"Thank you," Makoto said through soft hiccups. He pressed the heel of his palms to his eyes to try to stop the tears from flowing. "Thank you, Nanase-san."

He felt a hand gently rest on his shoulder, the fingers digging in comfortingly.

"Haru."

Makoto dropped his hands from his face and looked at his boss incredulously, his eyes wide and jaw dropped.

"What?" Makoto asked.

"Call me Haru," Nanase said.

Makoto wiped off the tears from his face in vain and then his lips twitched into a small smile.

"Okay, Haru. But only if you call me Makoto," he told him.

Nanase—no, *Haru*—nodded and allowed a small smile to grow on his face.

"All right, Makoto."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Mmn. I'm just going to take a hot shower and then head off to bed."

"If you're sure…"

Makoto smiled at Haru's continuing kindness, thankful to have a boss and a friend like him.

"Yeah. Thank you, again, for all of this. We really appreciate it," Makoto said, gesturing towards the inside of Haru's apartment.

Haru smiled and nodded. "You're welcome. Have a good night, Makoto."

"Mmn. You, too."

Makoto ducked into the bathroom and slid the door shut behind him. He leaned against the door and sighed, feeling exhausted from all of the emotions he had just went through. His body felt heavy but his heart felt light, a better trade than what he had been feeling lately.

He leaned up from the door and moved towards the tub to turn it on, ready for a hot shower and then bed. But the faucet to the tub stopped him in his tracks.

There was a little dolphin hanging on it, the toy attached to a keychain.

Makoto leaned down to inspect it, his eyes squinting at the faded color and bent fin.

"This… seems familiar somehow…" Makoto muttered.

He pinched the toy in between his fingers and twisted it in his grasp. It was nothing out of the ordinary but this particular keychain set Makoto's heart into overdrive.

"Why does it look familiar to me?"

Why?

Why…

"I'll win a prize for you, %$-chan!"

His black-haired friend sighed but he managed to smile. Makoto could not quite make out his face but he could at least tell he was smiling.

"Okay. Go for it, Makoto!"

"Okay!"

Makoto grabbed the ring, his tongue flicking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration, and he threw the ring almost straight up. It bounced off of the ceiling of the booth and then knocked down onto the table of prizes. It bounced a few times before landing around a small prize.

"Oh! You actually got something, Makoto," %$-chan said.

Makoto blinked and stood on his tip-toes to see where the ring had landed.

"I did? What is it?" Makoto asked.

The vendor came by with a wide smile on his face as he grabbed the prize from the table and handed it over to Makoto.

"Congratulations, kid!" he said.

Makoto peered down at the prize in his hand: a dolphin keychain. He smiled wide and showed it to his friend.

"%$-chan, look, look!" Makoto said, excitedly.

His friend nodded.

"I see it. It's a dolphin. Dolphins are pretty cool," he said.

"Here!" Makoto said, thrusting the keychain to his friend's chest. "I want you to have it."

"What? Me?" he asked, grabbing the little dolphin from him and looking at it. "Why?"

Makoto smiled brightly, his chest fluttering with pride.

"Because I wanted to win it for you!" Makoto said. "You're my best friend, %$-chan!"

"%$-chan…"

"Ha…-chan."

"Haru-chan!"

Makoto flinched back to reality when a sharp pain pulsed in his head, the name echoing in his mind. He blinked at the dolphin keychain one last time and he rubbed the back of his head where his scar lay hidden.

What… was that all about?

Makoto tried to wrack his brain for answers but his mind went blank, unable to produce any new information or images. He sighed and stood up from the tub.

"I must just be tired," he mumbled to himself.

He quickly moved to take off his clothes for his shower, the dolphin keychain thumping against the white tile, forgotten.

Haru sat on his bed, his resolve to sleep quickly fading with each minute. He stared out the window to the city, the buildings looking much bigger and closer than they had from the roof.

"The twins were born when I was around nine or ten, but we moved out of the area around then."

I should've done the math, Haru thought. *It makes complete sense why I didn't know the twins. They were not even born yet when Makoto and I played together.*

He leaned back until he flopped against the bed, his head cradled by his arms. He stared up at the ceiling.

He thought of Makoto's story earlier, the thought of his parents' deaths still fresh in his mind.

My childhood friend.

The person who risked it all for his siblings.

Haru closed his eyes, the image of Makoto's tears burned into his mind.

The person who waved my life.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to check out my Tumblr for any updates or info regarding my fics. Ask me a question if you'd like!

Aaand if anyone would like to do any kind of art for this fic, feel free to do so! :D

Do you think you can see it?

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! Another chapter for you!

Thank you again, Tayu-chan, for editing this even though you are busy! I really appreciate all the hard work you put into this for me :)

ALSO.
THERE'S MORE FANART. Please, PLEASE go check it out, it's AMAZING!
This one is done by the awesome velvloid!!
It's based off of the rooftop scene in Chapter 15 :) Check out the lovely art here!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I lost my job today."

"I was late too many times."

"Onii-chan! Ren is crying again!"

"It's okay, Ren. Don't cry."

"If I hadn't made Mom and Dad angry with me that day, then they wouldn't have gotten distracted! It was all my fault."

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"I want Mom and Dad!"

"I want…"

Onii-chan lost his job because of me.

Ren's eyes flew open as he sat up in bed, his little heart pounding quickly inside his chest. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, his eyes darting around to scan the bedroom.

When he glanced across the room and did not see another bed with his twin tucked away underneath her usual purple covers, his heart flipped in a panic. He was about to throw the covers off of himself when gentle, soft snores made him freeze. He leaned over the edge of his bed and looked down at the floor.

Makoto was lying on his back on a futon, his eyes closed and lips slightly parted in a deep slumber.

Oh, that's right, Ren thought. *We're at Nanase-san's place.*

Ren's pulse slowly started to calm down once he realized where he was and he turned in the bed to lie back down.

Onii-chan lost his job because of me.

The sudden thought from ages ago made his blood turn to ice in his veins. He glanced back down at his big brother, who was still softly sleeping away. Ren's heart clenched and he held his breath.

Did Onii-chan forget to pay the bill because I distracted him? Ren wondered.

He bit his lip and gripped the blankets in his fists, desperately trying to shake the fears that had gripped him so strongly. He rested his head back down on the pillow and buried his face into it, trying to push the thought from echoing in his mind.

Don't cry, don't cry, he told himself. *Just don't cry…*

"Mm… uh… okay, so… like… this?"

"Um… almost. Try again and use less this time. Make the strokes more wispy."

"O-Oh. Right. So… like… this?"

"Mmn. That's closer. Do that again on this side."

"Okay!"

Ren's pink tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth as he took the paintbrush and dipped it into a light green shade of paint. He carefully scraped off some of the excess and, with a shaking hand, lowered the tip of the brush to the white canvas in front of him.

Haru, sitting next to him, looked on with a scrutinizing gaze as the tip of the brush landed on the paper. He could feel Ran standing behind them, her hands gripping the back of Ren's chair.

For a moment, everything was still and quiet as Ren tried to quell his shaking. Even Ran remained as still as possible out of respect. Haru was grateful for her consideration.

The light green paint flayed out nicely against its darker green counterpart, making the dimensions of the bush spark to life instantly.

Haru saw Ren's eyes flash with pride and it made him smile a little. He opened his mouth to congratulate Ren on his hard work, but Ran's chirpy voice finally broke the concentrated silence.

"Wow!" Ran shouted from behind, making Haru wince.

Ren flinched at the noise, making his hand jerk and smearing light green paint across the light blue river he had started on earlier. Ren's face fell, his eyes sparkling now for a different reason. He pulled his paintbrush away and looked down in his lap sadly.

"Oh, no… I'm sorry, Ren," Ran apologized instantly, remorse written all over her face.

Ren looked up at her with big eyes and nodded as if to say *It's okay*, and then he turned to look at Haru expectantly. Haru stared at the painting in front of him, seeing the light green smeared over the river. The bush now looked like it had morphed into some kind of blob monster.

Haru bit back a grimace and glanced down at Ren, seeing how his eyes grown watery and sad. He paused for a minute, taking time to study the mistake, and then turned to grab the palette.

"Don't panic," Haru started. "This could be a great opportunity to learn, actually."

Ren blinked a few times, hopeful. He watched Haru handed the pallete to Ren and gestured towards the various shades of blue paints aligned together.

"I want you to try to fix it," Haru said.

Ren's lips pulled back, suddenly looking stricken. He glanced at the painting in front of him, the mistake blaringly loud on the canvas.

"H-How?" Ren asked.

Haru twisted his lips and then grabbed a new paintbrush, dipping it lightly in clean water and then taking some of the light blue paint. With careful upward strokes, he started to lightly paint over the blob of green that had invaded his river. The two colors started to mix, making the water look murkier rather than crystal clear.

"It's going to make this part of the river darker, but it could be more realistic that way," Haru said, continuing to brush along the river in long, smooth strokes. Haru pulled his brush back and Ren's eyes lit up once again.

That spot in the river was now more aqua, the green and blue meshing together to cast a shadow over the river. It seemed to reflect the green hues that surrounded it, making it look more realistic. It almost looked like it could be touched or smelled.

"Wow, it's like you're an expert. How did you know to do that?" Ren asked, his wide eyes looking back to Haru in astonishment.

Haru looked back at the painting and cocked his head, studying the now-darkened part of the river.

"Well, I wasn't always an expert. I made a lot of mistakes," Haru said. "But I realized that sometimes, you can turn mistakes into something good."

Ren's eyes widened, sparkling with a renewed energy. He turned back to the painting, eyeing the smeared green paint on the bush he had painted earlier.

"So, I can fix the bush?" Ren asked.

Haru nodded and then pointed to the green paints that were on Ren's palette.

"Try to see what you can do," Haru said. He put down his paintbrush and stood up from his chair. "I'm going to get you a clean glass of water."

Ren nodded, determined, his tears gone. Ran cheered him on from behind and the sight made Haru smile. It was nice seeing the two of them getting along again.

Haru walked back into the kitchen and grabbed a fresh glass of water for Ren's paints. Once he shut off the water, he heard a heavy sigh coming from down the hall, stopping him in his tracks. He blinked for a moment and stared down the hallway. He briefly wondered if he had been hearing things, but when the sigh came again, he knew he was not hallucinating.

He quickly walked back with the water in his grasp and placed it on the table next to Ren.

"I'll be back to help you in a minute. Keep trying," Haru said.

"Okay," Ren mumbled, his mind too absorbed in what he was doing to make eye contact.

Haru turned back from the twins and headed down the hallway towards the bedrooms, stopping

short outside of one of the extra bedrooms. The door was cracked open and Haru leaned forward slightly to peer inside.

Makoto was sitting on the floor next to the rolled up guest futon, his laptop on his lap and his hand holding his phone in a death-grip and… glasses? Makoto had glasses sitting on his nose.

Since when had he worn glasses? Haru thought. The sight intrigued him, briefly thinking that the dark frames suited him.

But the glasses shifted when Makoto's face scrunched up in either pain or frustration, and it made Haru's brows furrow in concern. He watched as Makoto leaned forward to squint at his laptop, making Haru wonder if his eyes were really that horrible, and he clicked on something. After another moment of staring unblinkingly at the screen, Makoto sighed and leaned back against the bed, reaching up to rub his eyes under his glasses.

Haru bit his lip. Makoto seemed all right when he had left that morning to put his checks in the mail for the utility bill, but now he seemed pent-up and strained, the stress quite literally showing on his face.

Haru needed to do something to get him to relax. He had already been under enough stress in the past year. Plus…

"Our parents died in a car accident…"

Haru's own chest ached at the thought. He had been so close with Makoto's parents growing up. They accepted him into their household like he was one of their own. He could not begin to imagine what all Makoto had been through. But now that he was here, Haru was determined to do whatever he could to help.

With a straightened back and a quick breath, Haru raised his fist and knocked lightly on the cracked door. Makoto jumped and glanced up from his laptop, his glasses falling askew over his nose.

"Oh, Na—Haru," Makoto fumbled.

Haru bit back a smile at hearing his first name. It was nice to hear it out of his childhood friend's mouth again.

"Can I come in?" Haru asked after a brief pause to take in Makoto's appearance.

Makoto nodded and sat up straighter, fixing his glasses on his nose. He rubbed the side of his neck and averted his eyes, suddenly looking apologetic.

"Sorry. I didn't know I would take this long," Makoto said as Haru entered the room.

Haru plopped down next to Makoto and leaned towards him, eyeing the laptop. On the screen were several apartment listings in the area, all of which were two bedrooms.

"What are you doing?" Haru asked, trying to sound casual.

Makoto's hand dropped from his neck and flopped into his lap. His shoulders sagged and he released a longsuffering sigh.

"I'm um… looking for a new apartment," Makoto explained.

Haru's brows creased a bit in concern. Had something happened with the check for the utility bill? Did he forget to pay his rent?

"Is something wrong with your current apartment?" Haru asked.

Makoto tried for a smile but it looked fragile. His eyes even crinkled around the edges, probably able to deceive anyone who did not know his real smile. But Haru has had the blessing of seeing his real smile and he knew that Makoto was about to crumble.

"Well… sort of," Makoto started.

His hand lifted back up but instead of going to his neck, he reached up and touched the back of his head. Haru had to fight to keep himself still, knowing that Makoto's fingers were brushing over that nasty scar he had hidden back there.

He would have to ask about that later.

"So… one of the requirements for being a legal guardian in my situation is that I provide good enough housing. The apartment we live in now is from when I was in college. It's only supposed to be for one person," Makoto explained.

Haru nodded, now understanding where he was going. But he kept silent to let Makoto continue.

"And Sato-san—oh, I mean, uh, the social worker said that I needed to get a bigger apartment. One with at least two bedrooms," Makoto said. He curled in on himself a little, looking oddly small for someone his size. "I've been searching for a while, but…"

When he did not finish he sentence, Haru leaned more towards him to get a closer look at the listings. And when Makoto did not push him away, he allowed himself to reach over and scroll down through some of the websites he had opened up.

Every listing was pretty pricy, especially in the immediate area. And even the listings that were a little out of the way were too much for someone like Makoto. Being his boss, Haru knew what kind of income he was making. He could connect the dots without Makoto having to tell him a thing.

"They're expensive," Haru said, immediately taking the edge off.

Makoto slumped and sighed, lifting his hands to cover his eyes and groan.

"*Yes*," Makoto said in a whine.

Haru smiled a little at the noise, glad the thick tension had released itself from the small space. After a moment, however, Makoto dropped his hands into his lap and looked down at them. His cheeks were red and he would not look at Haru.

"I've almost got enough for a deposit, but I guess… I guess I'm scared about not making it in time," Makoto said sadly.

Haru's brows furrowing once again and he leaned forward to try to catch Makoto's eyes.

"How much time do you have?" Haru asked.

Makoto's lip pulled to one side in a grimace.

"Um… the inspection is in less than two weeks," Makoto said, a little glumly. "I'm… I'm *so* close. Just a few more shifts and I should have enough. I think."

Haru bit his lip and looked down at his lap, thinking through all of the shifts that Makoto was scheduled for in the coming week. He was already working himself to death, requesting an extra few shifts.

After Makoto had opened up about his situation last night, Haru finally understood why he had asked for the second job. But what Haru did not realize was how dire the situation was. He had been reluctant from the start to give Makoto the second job, but now he wanted to help in any way he could.

But Haru wished he could help without Makoto having to work down to the bone.

"I… You should be fine without having to take extra shifts, right?" Haru asked.

With a thoughtful hum, Makoto tilted his head back and peered up at the ceiling, his hands still lying limp in his lap.

"Well… I did take off almost all this week, so…" Makoto's sentence trailed off, leaving Haru to piece together what he was going to say. "I really can't take any chances now. The social worker isn't really… happy with how I'm doing."

Haru sat up straighter, his hands coming down to grip his thighs tightly. What in the world did *that* mean?

"Not… happy?" Haru asked. "All you have to do is get a bigger apartment, right?"

Makoto's gaze fell back to his lap and he hunched in on himself again, looking guilty and skittish. He squirmed a little, shifting and fidgeting on his spot on the floor.

"Well, there's been a few incidents recently that have… made her unhappy," Makoto said. His brows upturned, making his entire face turn sad. "I… I've made so many mistakes. I just want to keep our family together."

Haru paused, his gaze turning to look down at his lap. His hands were still resting on his knees, gripping them tightly. He released his grip and rubbed his knees to get the blood flowing again and he noticed a spot of green paint dried on his thumb. He lifted up his hand to inspect it, wondering when the paint had even gotten there in the first place.

That was when he remembered the conversation with Ren.

He quickly glanced to Makoto, his hand curling into a loose fist.

"It's okay to make mistakes, you know," Haru said, letting his fist fall into his lap. "We're humans. We're going to make mistakes."

Makoto looked up at him, the weariness in his gaze slowly starting to lift.

"It's what you do with those mistakes that make a difference," Haru concluded.

"Haru…" Makoto whispered, his green eyes watering.

"I can help you get through this. I'll even help you move into your new apartment when you find one," Haru offered. "And I'm sure that Nagisa and Rei will want to help, too."

Makoto sniffed and squinted his eyes, trying to hold back the tears from falling. Haru inhaled through his nose and softened his voice. The last thing he wanted to do was to make Makoto more

upset, but he wanted to reassure his friend. He wanted his friend to rely on him like he used to when they were children.

"You don't have to go through this alone," Haru concluded.

Makoto's face scrunched up as a tear slipped out of his eye. His breath hitched and he hastily reached up to lift his glasses and wipe the tear from his face and eyes.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto said, his voice tight.

Haru smiled, knowing that the tears were not unhappy ones, and he hummed in response. He watched as Makoto finished wiping his eyes and he let his glasses fall back onto his sniffling nose, his gaze turning back to Haru with a thankful smile. Haru could almost see himself reflected in Makoto's lenses.

"I never knew you had glasses," Haru commented, trying to change the subject to lighten the mood.

Makoto's smile fell and he blinked a few times before scrambling to take the glasses off of his face. His cheeks burned red as he fumbled with his reasons for having them. Something about concentration and needing them back in middle school. It made Haru smile, finding out something new about his old friend every day.

Makoto's muttering stopped after a few minutes when his eyes moved to the clock on his computer screen. He glanced up at Haru with an opened gaze, not closed off, as it had been earlier.

"Oh, uh… don't you have to get to the restaurant soon?" Makoto asked.

Haru leaned over to look at the time, seeing that it was getting close to eleven in the morning. The restaurant opened later on the weekends to give everyone a break from having to come in so early during the week.

Haru usually liked getting there early to prep, but having the Tachibana family here made that choice excruciatingly difficult. He wanted to spend more time with them, get to know them. He wanted to help Ren with his art project, maybe even play a game with Ran. He wanted to find out about Makoto's life after he moved, and why Makoto remembered nothing of their childhood friendship.

For the first time in years, Haru had found that he no longer wanted to be alone.

He wanted his friend back.

Haru pouted a little at his suggestion, glaring at the clock as if time itself had been a burden.

"I'll go in a little later today," Haru said, standing to his feet. "I'll make us lunch first."

"O-Oh, did you need help?" Makoto asked, looking ready to stand to his feet as well.

Haru smiled down at him and shook his head. "That's all right. You keep searching for an apartment."

It was Makoto's turn to pout but it only lasted a moment, his face changing into a fond smile.

"You're spoiling me, Haru," Makoto said, making Haru want to roll his eyes. "But thank you. Really. I want to repay you for all the kindness you've shown me."

Makoto's head lowered into a bow and Haru bit back a groan.

"Stop that," Haru said, turning to leave the bedroom. "I'll call you when lunch is ready."

As he left the bedroom, Haru could hear Makoto's sweet chuckle echoing from inside.

"Yes, *boss*."

Haru did roll his eyes this time as he shut the bedroom door behind him quietly. He shuffled down the hallway towards the kitchen, thinking of what to make for lunch.

"I'm not sure it looks right."

Haru froze at the edge of the hallway when he heard Ren's sad voice from the living room. He peered around the corner and saw Ren still sitting on his stool in front of the easel, his head hanging and his lips pulled into a frown. Ran was standing next to him with her hands on her hips.

"What are you talking about, Ren? The bush looks even better than before!"

Ren hesitated, his brows pulled together in frustration.

"Yeah, but…"

He did not finish his sentence, and Haru wondered where this strange mood swing even came from. The silence was suddenly broken when Ran spoke up again.

"You're worried about those guys bullying you about it, aren't you?"

Haru's heart skipped a beat and his eyes widened. He watched as Ren's head hung further, his hands curling into tight fists on his thighs. His silence was enough to answer Ran's question and she seemed to know that. She sighed and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll protect you, you know?" Ran said.

Ren's face scrunched up and he swallowed, nodding slowly, and it made Haru's chest ache.

"I just… I know they'll make fun of me for it," Ren said in a whimper.

Haru glanced up at the painting, squinting to look his progress. The green bush really did look better than before. It had a more realistic feel to it, the leaves having more depth and shadows to make it stand out against the light green grass that surrounded it.

So why? Haru thought. *Why would they bully him for this?*

He watched on until Ren calmed himself, his arm coming up to wipe his face. He almost looked terrified to even look at his painting.

Haru bit his lip, his eyes flitting back to the bedroom where Makoto was still searching for apartments on his computer. He wondered if Makoto knew anything about the bullying that was happening.

Haru sighed.

This information would be something he would have to bring up later.

Ren buttoned up the blazer of his uniform and sighed, trying to adjust it around his neck and shoulders. It was starting to get too small for him, he noticed. Maybe he had finally started to hit

his growth spurt.

He paused to take a deep breath. Monday had rolled around too quickly, the weekend gone in a flash. He desperately hoped that school would be normal today without any of those upperclassmen bothering him.

"Ren, you ready to go?"

Ren jumped at the sound of his brother's voice just outside the door and he scrambled to grab his backpack. He swung open the door to the bedroom and found his older brother standing just outside the door, a surprised look on his face.

"Oh, you're ready," Makoto said, and then he smiled and nodded. "Good. Let's go."

Ren felt guilt prick his chest and he quickly nodded and shut the door behind him, throwing the backpack over his shoulders. He followed Makoto out to the living room where Ran and Nanase were waiting by the genkan.

"Ah, finally. I thought you got lost or something!" Ran chirped with a fake pout.

Ren rubbed the back of his neck and offered the tiniest of smiles. He glanced up at Nanase, noticing that he was eyeing him carefully.

"Oh. G-Good morning, Nanase-san," Ren said softly.

Nanase blinked at him for a moment before humming and nodding slightly at him, his blue eyes still locked onto him. It made Ren feel uneasy.

"Okay, we need to get you guys off to school," Makoto said, after he slipped on his shoes. "Let's go!"

The four of them all filed out of Nanase's apartment and headed down to the elevators. Once they made it to the ground floor, they left the complex and headed down the street towards the train station.

"Sorry for staying so long," Ren heard Makoto apologize.

"Stop apologizing," Nanase said without any real bite to his words.

Makoto chuckled and scratched his cheek. "Right. Anyway, I plan on calling our landlord to ask if the power's been turned back on yet. But, I doubt it has since check hasn't gone through, yet."

"If the power is back on, do we have to go back home today?" Ran asked in a small whine.

"Of course we do. We can't overstay our welcome," Makoto explained.

Ran sighed and hung her head. "*Man.* I wish we could stay at Nanase-san's place forever."

"Ran."

Ren turned the idea over in his head a few times. He found that he would not mind staying at Nanase's apartment longer. He has all of the cool paints and the bedrooms are nice.

And…

Ren glanced up at Makoto, watching as he chuckled at something that Nanase had said. It was a

smile that he had not seen on his brother's face in a while.

… their big brother looked happier.

Ren bit his lip and stared at the ground, his hands returning to their normal positions at the straps of his backpack.

After riding a few stops on the train, they arrived at the northern end of town. They walked down the sidewalk and a few crosswalks before arriving at the restaurant, where Nanase stopped.

"I'll be back in a minute," Makoto told Nanase.

Nanase seemed to hesitate by the door of his restaurant, his eyes still looking down to meet Ren's. Ren squirmed in place, wondering if there was something on his face. He hoped he had not offended Nanase in some way. He really appreciated all the help he received with his artwork and wanted to continue with the lessons.

"Ren."

Ren snapped his head up to see Nanase looking directly at him, his face calm but black brows furrowed slightly.

"Y-Yes?" Ren asked in a light squeak.

"I can help you more with your painting tonight after I'm done with work, if you want," Nanase offered.

Ren's heart fluttered and his eyes widened.

"Really?" Ren asked.

Nanase nodded, a hint of a smile on his face. And Ren smiled back, looking up at Makoto for confirmation.

"If the power is still out, then you can definitely work on it," Makoto said with a smile.

Ren turned back to Nanase and nodded firmly, making Nanase hum in response.

"See you then," Nanase said, and then he disappeared inside the restaurant.

"He's so confident that the power is still going to be off," Makoto chuckled softly. "All right, that's enough stalling. I don't want you guys to be late for school."

Ren's smile was wide on his face as he followed his brother and sister to their middle school. He could not wait to work with Nanase again. And it would give his brother a chance to have another peaceful night of sleep and laughter. It was a nice change that Ren wanted to see more often.

"I'll pick you up in between my shifts," Makoto said once they made it to the gate of the school.

"Okay. We'll see you then, Onii-chan!" Ran said, and then she looked to Ren. "Last one to class has to clean our rooms when we get back!" she challenged, and with a wave of her hand, she took off to the front of the school.

"Ah, R-Ran!" Ren called, watching her leave. "Ah, bye, Onii-chan!" Ren called over his shoulder as he rushed into the school.

Ren burst through the front entrance of the school and hurried to the shoe lockers, wondering if Ran had already changed her shoes. He whirled around a row of lockers, eager to get to his locker first, when he ran smack into a solid chest. He stumbled backward until he fell onto the ground. He leaned up and rubbed the scratches on his palms, an apology already forming on his lips.

"Ah, sorry, I was—"

He stopped short when he was met with a harsh snarl by a familiar face.

It was one of the upperclassmen bullies that he usually tried to avoid.

Ren snapped his mouth shut, almost biting his tongue, and crawled back a little.

"S-S…"

The apology was stuck in Ren's rapidly closing throat as the upperclassmen shoved his hands in his pockets and loomed over him, his face twisting into a sneer.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you crybaby?" he threatened.

Ren bowed his head to hide his eyes. The floor became blurry as tears filled his sight.

Don't cry. Do what your brother told you! Ren begged himself.

"Tch. Already crying and the day hasn't even started, yet," the upperclassman mocked.

He kicked Ren's stray backpack, sending it back a few feet. The bundle of pencils that Nanase had given him spilled out and scattered on the tile floor. Ren watched in horror as the upperclassmen kicked a few of them out of the way, flinging them in different directions.

"See you at club, Crybaby," he scoffed before disappearing around the row of shoe lockers.

Ren took a few shaky breaths to steady the tremors that threatened to tear his body apart. Then, he lifted himself up onto his wobbling legs and scrambled to pick up as many pencils as he could. Several of them had broken but Ren did not want to lose a single one. It was a nice gift that he did not want to ruin or lose.

Once his backpack was secured over his shoulders, he quickly swapped out his shoes and hurried upstairs to his classroom. Ran was already at her desk, chatting away with some of the other girls in their class. She looked up when Ren walked in, her smile wide and mocking, but it fell as soon as she saw his face.

Ren sighed, not wanting to acknowledge her questioning look, and he just headed straight for his desk. He unceremoniously plopped down and leaned forward on his arms to bury his face.

Don't cry. He repeated the mantra in his head over and over right up until the bell rang.

Don't cry.

Haru knew something had been wrong the moment Makoto came back after his first shift with the twins.

Ren's face was sullen, the skin underneath his eyes dark and red. Ran looked a little subdued as well but she was still managing to keep a conversation going with Makoto as they walked to the break room.

Haru's brows furrowed, filing away the information for later. He knew that something had happened and he was determined to find out.

Once the end of the night came to a close, Haru found the three Tachibanas waiting for him at the front. He locked up the front door and started down the sidewalk with the three of them following.

"So, I'm guessing the power hasn't turned back on?" Haru asked Makoto, a little too confidently.

Makoto pouted a little. "You don't have to rub it in," Makoto teased.

"I'm not," Haru said, trying his best to stop the smirk from growing. "I just had a feeling that it wouldn't be on tonight."

"You're smiling! You *are* teasing me!" Makoto said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Haru said, stilling his face and looking away.

"*Haru!"*

Haru allowed himself to smile. It was so nice. So, *so* nice. Everything felt natural and comfortable, just as it used to be. It was like the old days, when he and Makoto would play at the playground, building sandcastles and climbing on the jungle gym.

But then, there was a soft sniffle to his side, making Haru glance down. Ren's eyes were downcast and his face was still pulled into a frown.

Well. It was *almost* like the old days.

After the train ride and walking a few blocks, they reached Haru's apartment. Once they stepped inside, Makoto took off his tie and sighed.

"All right, Ren. You can work on your art project but don't stay up too late, okay?" Makoto told him.

Ren jumped, appearing to snap out of a daze, and nodded at his big brother mutely. Haru watched Ren's gaze fall as he walked over to the easel that was still set up on the far side of the living room. Makoto seemed to notice it, too, but he said nothing.

How often does Ren come home looking like this? Haru wondered.

"Okay. I'm going to do some more… research," Makoto said to Haru. He placed a hand on Haru's shoulder and squeezed lightly. "Thanks for helping him. I—He really appreciates it"

Haru smiled softly, hearing the underlying meaning behind Makoto's words, and he nodded. Makoto squeezed his shoulder one last time before disappearing down the hall, a sleepy Ran in tow.

Once Haru heard two bedroom doors shut, he walked to Ren's side and sat down on the chair next to him. He bit his lip, wondering the best way to approach the whole situation. He was never good at subtlety, only getting his blunt opinions across in a brash manner. Seeing Ren distressed, he knew he had to take a gentler approach.

"What did you want to add to the painting?" Haru decided to ask.

Ren looked up at the easel and stared at it for a moment, his lip sucking in between his teeth. He tilted his head and sighed heavily before finally settling on a shrug.

"I'm not sure," Ren admitted a second later.

Haru studied the painting, seeing that he had already painted a beautiful river along with a grassy hillside and a bush. There was also the beginning of a tree along the side with long, thick branches that reached up to the sky. It was incredible talent so far, especially for someone at Ren's age. But Haru knew that if he wanted to win the competition, he should add something unique to it.

"What about something with the tree?" Haru asked, pointing to it. "There's some space to add something next to it or on it. Any ideas?"

Ren stared at the spot where Haru's finger hovered, his brown eyes looking glassier than usual. He tilted his head to the other side and then glanced up at Haru, eyes almost pleading.

"What about a tire swing?" Ren asked.

Haru's brows lifted and he turned back to look at the space.

"A tire swing?" Haru asked, a little confused.

Sure, a tire swing would fill in the gap but it was not something that would really make the viewer think. It was considered something standard and normal.

"Yeah. Like… lying on the ground with a broken chain," Ren suddenly added.

Haru whipped his head back to look at Ren, seeing nothing but sadness in his eyes.

"Why broken?" Haru asked.

Ren hunched his back a little and stared at the ground.

"It… kind of reminds me of when we would go to the park when I was younger," Ren started. "My dad would push me on the old tire swing all the time. We would go whenever the weather was nice. But then, one day, we found the tire swing on the ground. Someone had broken it."

Haru's heart felt as if it were sinking inside his chest. Ren's voice sounded so small and fragile.

"It made you sad," Haru stated, and Ren nodded.

"We didn't go to the park as much anymore after that," Ren said.

Haru paused, trying to take it in. He glanced at the painting, wondering if that was the direction Ren wanted to go. It was all right to paint how you felt but… it made Haru worry.

"Are you feeling sad now?" Haru asked.

Ren curled in himself a little more, avoiding Haru's eyes. His silence, once again, spoke volumes. Haru took a deep breath, ready to bring up the subject as carefully as he could. He did not want to scare Ren away. He was like a terrified stray kitten.

"Are you feeling more sad because of the bullies at school?"

Ren took in a sharp breath and snapped his head up to look at Haru with wide, horrified eyes. His mouth opened and closed without a word and his frame started to tremble as tears filled his eyes.

"H-How did you… how did you know about that?" Ren asked, sniffling hard.

Haru winced as the sound. He rubbed the back of his head a little guiltily. Maybe he should have been a tad more subtle.

"I overheard you and Ran talking about it the other day," Haru said. Ren sniffed again and nodded, understanding written on his face. "Does your brother know about this?"

Ren tensed and then he shook his head from side to side, and the answer startled Haru. Why did Makoto not know? And now, Ren looked infinitely more nervous than before.

"Why not? I think it's something he deserves to know," Haru said, trying to keep his voice soft and not firm.

Ren's hands clenched around the edges of the stool that he sat on and his shoulders rose.

"I don't want to make Onii-chan worry," Ren said.

Haru's brows furrowed. "But, he's your caretaker and your older brother. It's his job to worry."

Ren shook his head side to side again. "I've already made him worry enough in the past. He seems so stressed out anyway and… I don't want to add to that."

Haru leaned forward, trying to see Ren's eyes.

"I'm sure you haven't made him stress in the past," Haru said.

"I have," Ren said, sounding sure of himself.

"What are you talking about?" Haru asked gently. "I don't think he would ever say that you've caused him stress—"

"I'm the reason Onii-chan lost his old job."

Haru paused, looking at Ren incredulously. He opened his mouth to press for more questions but Ren continued.

"I cry a lot, and I would cry in the mornings before school. Onii-chan would have to comfort me every morning and it made him late to work too many times," Ren stated. "It made him lose his job."

Haru winced at his reasoning, immediately shaking his head to dismiss the idea.

"I'm sure that you weren't the cause for him being late," Haru said.

Ren shook his head and shrugged, looking utterly defeated.

"And now, the upperclassmen at school bully me for crying so much," Ren said, moving on past Haru's statement of reassurance. "If Onii-chan found out, he'd be upset and he would spend all his time worrying about me. And I… I don't want to get him fired again."

Ren peered up at Haru sheepishly, hunching his back as if afraid of what Haru would say next. It was almost as if Ren expected Haru to fire Makoto on the spot for even having this conversation.

Just how much blame did this boy harbor?

Haru reached out and grabbed Ren's shoulder, giving it a light squeeze.

"I'm not going to fire your brother. No matter what," Haru promised. "Okay?"

Ren bit his lip and nodded, his eyes brimming with tears again.

"Good. So you can talk to your brother about the bullies. He'll help you to stop them," Haru said.

Ren shook his head again and Haru clenched his jaw. He wanted to pull his hair out.

Tenacity must run in the family.

"If he finds out then he'll be upset," Ren said. "I really don't want to worry him."

Haru sighed and ran a hand down his face, trying to think of ways to help Ren without getting Makoto involved. He knew that Ren's first option should be to talk to Makoto but he needed to do it himself.

"Well, if you're so insistent on not getting your brother involved, then we need to come up with a plan to get them off of your back," Haru said. He sat up and braced his hands on his thighs, looking at Ren with a determined gaze. "You should stand up for yourself."

Ren's eyes widened. "B-But f-fighting isn't—"

Haru lifted up his hand to stop him.

"I didn't say anything about fighting them," Haru said. He let his hand drop back down onto his lap. "You should do it peacefully, without throwing any punches. But don't let yourself be their human punching bag. Got it?"

Ren nodded once and then bit his lip, turning his gaze back to the easel in front of him. He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"But… I'm not strong," Ren said.

Haru paused, thinking of what Makoto did often to the twins to comfort them. He reached forward with a tentative hand and ruffled Ren's hair. It seemed to surprise Ren but he did not pull away. Instead, he looked up at Haru with wonder in his eyes.

"You want to protect your brother," Haru said. "That sounds pretty strong to me."

Ren's eyes flashed and blinked up at Haru. "Really?"

Haru nodded and hummed.

"Really," Haru said, and he took his hand away. "I still think you should tell your brother, though."

Ren looked away, his brows pulled together tightly.

"Just think about it… okay?" Haru asked.

Ren visibly swallowed and nodded. Haru hummed in response, satisfied with his answer, and then he turned to look at the easel.

"So… one broken tire swing?" Haru said.

Ren straightened his back and looked to Haru, determination in his eyes.

"One broken tire swing."

The air the next morning had been next to freezing. Ren could feel his teeth chattering as he walked through the courtyard of the school to get to his shoe locker. He did not think he wrote down a single word in his notes all day. His mind was too preoccupied with Nanase's voice bouncing around in his brain to think about anything else.

"You should stand up for yourself."

Ren groaned and rubbed a hand down his face.

Yeah, but how? Ren thought, asking the pretend Nanase in his mind. *How do I stand up for myself without getting violent?*

He sighed as he approached the lockers, thankful that he had managed to avoid the upperclassmen all day so far. Although, he *did* have to skip art club to guarantee it, but he found that it was worth not seeing them for an hour. He prayed and held his breath that the last few minutes of his day would be bully-free.

But, of course, as soon as he turned the corner, he saw the three faces he had been dreading all day standing next to his own locker.

Ren gulped, freezing in his footsteps. His knees started to tremble and his hands shook by his sides.

Maybe he should just slowly turn around and—

"Hey!"

Ren jumped, his shoulders rising in defense. He turned his head back towards the boys to see them approaching him, all with sneers on their faces.

"We didn't see you at art club today, Crybaby," one of them said.

"Yeah," the tallest one scoffed, leaning forward. "We really missed seeing your crying face."

One of them smacked his palm on the lockers next to Ren's head, making him jump at the sound.

"Why'd you skip? Afraid of seeing us today?" one of them asked.

The other two snickered behind their hands as Ren squirmed, looking for a way out. He noticed that some of the other students were eyeing them carefully.

"What? Trying to find someone to help you?"

"Oh! What about that bratty sister of yours?"

Ren scowled, his heart flipping at the jab at his sister.

"Don't talk about my sister that way," Ren said lowly.

The upperclassmen looked at him in shock before their faces fell into harsh glares.

"What'd you say?" one of them asked.

"How dare you tell us what to do?!"

Suddenly, Ren's collar was yanked forward and then he was slammed against the lockers, the hinges digging into his back. He yelped at the pain and clawed at the boy's hands on his collar.

"Someone outta teach you a lesson for talking back," the upperclassman said.

Ren glanced around, noticing as some of his fellow classmates started to gather. He looked for another way to escape but he was pinned hard against the lockers.

"Looking for a way out, eh? Well tough. We're not letting you go this time!"

Ren struggled in his grasp, the hinges and bars still scraping at his aching back. He needed to come up with a plan. What should he do? Where should he go? Should he reach for his phone?! What now?

Nanase did not tell him what to do if this were to happen!

Ren grit his teeth. He needed to do *something*. Something to get them to back off, and possibly for good. He needed to come up with a plan before—

"Ren?!"

Ren snapped his head over to see Ran standing at the end of the row of lockers, her eyes wide and jaw dropped. After a moment, she dropped her bag on the floor and started stomping towards them, her hands curled into fists.

"You should do it peacefully, without throwing any punches."

"Hey! Leave my brother—"

"Ran! N-No!" Ren called, making her stop in her tracks.

Ran stared at him, worry clearly etched into her face. She opened her mouth to protest, but Ren shook his head.

"Don't interfere! I… I can do this," Ren told her.

"Huh?!" Ran yelled.

"Ohh, being a tough guy now, huh?!" the upperclassman sneered.

The upperclassman reared back his fist.

"*REN!"* Ran shrieked.

"Say your prayers, Crybaby!"

The fist got closer.

"But don't let yourself be their human punching bag."

Ren reached up and grabbed the boy's wrist before the punch could collide with his cheek. He held it there with a shaking grip, his eyes staring up at the bully who still held him up against the lockers. The bullies' eyes all widened, seemingly surprised by Ren's movements.

"I… I may be a crybaby, but…" Ren pulled the boy's shaking fist down and away from his face. "But at least I'm… I'm not a bully like *you."*

Ren yanked down the bully's arm, making him yelp and drop Ren onto the ground. Ren landed on his wobbling feet, bracing himself against the lockers to prevent himself from actually collapsing. The other two upperclassmen approached Ren with anger in their stances.

"Why you little crybaby!"

He threw a punch but Ren ducked down into a crouch, the boy's fist slamming into the lockers just above his head. He pulled his fist back with a yelp of his own and glowered down at Ren.

"At least I'm not constantly bullying someone younger than me," Ren said, his voice getting louder.

The third bully stepped forward and grabbed onto Ren's arm, pulling him up from the ground and shoving him face-first into the lockers. Ren grimaced at the pain of one of the handles digging into his cheek.

"Shut *up*, you little punk!"

Ren wiggled and yanked his arm out of the bully's grasp, turning around the to face the three of them. He could feel the tears gathering in his eyes, the adrenaline making his heart pound louder in his ears.

"That's *it!"* the leader of the three said, reaching forward to grab onto Ren's collar once again. He pushed Ren backward until he fell onto his back, the bully straddling him with a look of pure fury in his eyes. "I'll teach you to mess with us, you stupid crybaby!"

Ren winced at the bully's words, his heart pounding away inside his chest.

"You want to protect your brother."

Ren gulped as the bully reared his fist back once again.

"That sounds pretty strong to me."

The fist started down towards him.

Ren could see hear his sister's screams from above, begging them to stop.

He could see his brother's sad face as he tried to smile and tell them he was not exhausted from work.

He could…

He could see his father's smiling face as he pushed him on the tire swing.

"So… one broken tire swing?"

The tears slid down Ren's face.

"One broken tire swing."

"At least I'm not some bully who's terrorizing an *orphan!"*

There was a collective gasp in the locker room, including a couple of gasps from the bullies.

Ren could feel the tears slide down his cheeks and into his ears. His head pounded against his skull

from being knocked around so violently but he found that he did not care.

All he thought about at the moment was how much he missed his parents.

"I want my mom and dad back! And you… you… *jerks* keep making it worse!" Ren shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Ren…" Ran's wobbling voice echoed in the locker room.

"Why?! Why are only picking on me?! Did you know that my parents are dead?! Is *that* why?!"

Ren was not sure where all this anger had stemmed from all of a sudden. Words just started to spew from his mouth uncontrollably. He was not even sure of the exact words he said, but he could hear some of the students around them gasp. Had he cursed a few times? He was not completely sure.

"Just leave me alone! Leave my sister alone!" Ren shouted. "You guys are jerks. Why won't you just let me move on, huh?! Why do you have to remind me about my *dead parents?!"*

"Ren," Ran called again, her voice laced with thick sobs. It made Ren's heart ache and a hot fire lit in his belly.

"Stop making us cry all the time," Ren threatened, the tears still spilling from his eyes. "Or you'll be sorry you ever messed with us."

Ren's heart seized in his chest. Where did that threat even come from?

Above him, the bullies had gone as still as a stone, their eyes wide and jaws dropped. The fist that hung in the air began to shake, their angry countenances starting to falter.

"You… we… I…" the bully above him stuttered. He suddenly tensed up, ready to make another swing, and Ren raised his hands to protect his face from the oncoming swing, but nothing came.

Then, the weight on his hips lifted and the bully clambered off of him. He shoved his hands into his pockets and hurried out of the locker room, the other two upperclassmen quickly stumbingling after him.

Ren still laid on the ground, his chest heaving and eyes wide as he stared up at the ceiling. How had he survived all that? Did he just… win?

How did he come up with all that?

"Ren!"

Suddenly, Ren was hauled up from the floor and pulled into a crushing hug. He saw the dark hair out of the corner of his eye, a little pigtail tickling his temple.

"R-Ran?" Ren mumbled.

"You idiot!" Ran cried, squeezing him harder. "You big, stupid idiot!"

Her shoulders started to tremble and Ren threw his arms around her to hold her still.

"Sorry," Ren apologized. "I… I didn't mean to say all those things, I—"

Ran suddenly pulled back, tears still running down her cheeks to meet at her chin.

"Don't you *dare* apologize, idiot!" Ran yelled, shaking his shoulders. "Stupid. Idiot. Annoying brother! Ren!"

She collapsed into his chest for another hug, making Ren grunt.

"Hey, is my name an insult now?" Ren murmured, holding her back.

"Idiot," Ran said back, her voice muffled against his chest.

Ren took a deep breath and then sighed, the tears no longer flowing down his cheeks.

For the first time in a while, he did not feel the need to cry.

"I still think you should tell your brother, though."

Ren frowned and then placed his hands on Ran's shoulders to pull her back. She looked at him with confused eyes, the tears still fresh on her cheeks.

"I think… I think I need to talk to Onii-chan about this," Ren said.

Ran's eyes widened but then her face scrunched up, the tears coming down more heavily. She nodded fervently and then leaned forward to bury her face into Ren's shoulder.

"I-I'll be there with you, if y-you want m-me to," Ran said through hiccups.

Ren nodded against her hair and squeezed her shoulders.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Did they physically hurt you?"

"Today?! Where? Show me."

"Looks like some nasty bruises. Do you need ice?"

Haru sat out on his living room couch, listening to the muffled question after question that Makoto was giving Ren back in their bedroom down the hall. He knew as soon as the twins came into the restaurant that something had happened. And with Ran's nonstop tears and Ren's utterly calm demeanor, Haru knew that it had to have been drastic. I was as if they switched personalities.

Haru could not catch all of the details, but it appeared that Ren had finally stood up for himself against the bullies. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, hoping that he did not give the wrong advice. He hoped and prayed that Makoto would not be mad at him.

"Don't worry. We'll go to the principal's tomorrow before I go to work and we'll sort it out, okay?"

Haru sat up straighter, knowing the conversation was coming to a close.

"Okay. You guys need to get some sleep. I love you."

There was a shuffling of feet and the sounds of doors softly closing before Makoto appeared around the corner of the hallway, his body fatigued and face sullen. He walked over to the couch and plopped down next to Haru, throwing an arm over his eyes.

"Everything okay?" Haru asked a little sheepishly.

Makoto hummed without taking his arm from his eyes.

"It will be. *They* will be," Makoto said. He paused before adding a small, "I think."

Haru blinked at him, waiting for him to explain on his own. He did not want to pry, especially since it was none of his business to begin with. He thought about maybe getting up to make tea to calm him down, but Makoto suddenly shifted, taking the arm from his face.

"I can't believe it," Makoto whispered, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "All this time, he had been bullied. And I never noticed."

Haru winced, biting his lip. He sat forward, trying to get Makoto's attention.

"He hid it well. I couldn't tell, either," Haru said.

Makoto sighed heavily and put his head into his hands.

"But I'm his *brother*. I should be able to tell when something is wrong," Makoto said. He sat back up, looking up at the ceiling with a miserable look on his face. "I've failed him."

"Hey…" Haru started, reaching over to grip his shoulder with much more force than he had with Ren the night before. "You didn't *know*. For all you knew, Ren was still grieving. You had no idea that his problems could've stemmed from school."

"But I should've looked into more. I should've asked until he told me. I shouldn't have just… let it go," Makoto said. He lowered his gaze into his lap and sighed again. "I'm such a no-good brother."

"Oi," Haru warned, his voice much more firm. It made Makoto flinch and look up at him with wide eyes. "Don't talk about my friend that way."

Makoto blinked at him. "Haru…"

"You're a great big brother. You're doing all you can to help and you love them with all your heart," Haru said. "And that's enough. *You're* enough."

"But—"

"No arguing," Haru interrupted, letting go of Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto opened his mouth to protest but promptly shut it when he saw Haru's nasty glare. He fell back against the cushion, leaning back until his head rested against the back of the couch. Makoto chuckled softly, and Haru saw his eyes shimmering a little.

"I guess I can't go against what my boss says, huh?" Makoto said wetly.

A tear fell down Makoto's cheek and his smile faded from his lips. He lifted his arm to flop over his eyes again and he took slow breaths through his nose.

Haru's heart throbbed against his chest and he glanced out the window, seeing the lights from the buildings lighting up the night sky. He turned back to Makoto and reached forward to touch his arm, gently prying it away from his eyes. Makoto looked at him with wet eyes and scrunched brows.

"Hey," Haru started. "Wanna go to the roof?"

Makoto blinked a few times before letting a small huff leave his mouth.

"Yeah. I do."

Chapter End Notes

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If you want to do artwork for this fic, please do! I love looking at so many wonderful artworks and I never grow tired of it! Just make sure you tag me in it on Tumblr!

Do you know where the end is?

Chapter Notes

Hello, guys! Another chapter for you. And this one is a long one!

Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU Tayu-chan, for helping me out with this chapter. Seriously, I don't think my emotional/mental state would have handled it alone.

Also, I'm sorry for not getting to your comments this week! I've been really drained just physically, emotionally, mentally... But I did read all of your lovely comments and I appreciated every single one. You guys are wonderful human beings and I am so happy to have such awesome readers!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you coming Onii-chan?"

"Yeah, just let me do one more sweep around the apartment to double check that we have everything."

Makoto walked back into the guest bedroom that he and Ren had shared for the past few days and glanced around, making sure that he had grabbed all his chargers and clothes. Once he was done with that bedroom, he stepped into the second bedroom to see if Ran had left anything.

Good. Both rooms are empty, Makoto thought.

He nodded to himself and backed out of the bedroom, closing the door shut. He was about to head out to the front of Haru's apartment but he jolted to a halt at the bathroom door.

Oh, I should check if we left anything in here, Makoto thought.

Makoto peered down the hallway to see Haru talking pleasantly to Ran and Ren and then he quickly slipped into the bathroom. He searched around the counter space for any abandoned toothbrushes or mouthwash. When the counter was found empty, he walked over to the tub to look for shampoo bottles.

But then, Makoto paused in his search.

The little dolphin keychain was still hanging on the bathtub faucet, its fin still bent and blue color faded.

Makoto's heart did a strange flip as it caught his eye, his breath pausing in his chest. He leaned forward and grabbed the tail of the dolphin, turning it in between his fingers to study it. Even its touch was familiar.

Why was this little trinket so familiar to him?

Where had he seen it before?

"Oh! You actually got something, Makoto."

"I did? What is it?"

A sharp pain pierced through Makoto's brain, making him wince as the voices echoed in his mind. He recognized his own childish voice, the image coming back to him in fuzzy pieces.

"%$@-chan, look, look!"

"I see it. It's a dolphin. Dolphins are pretty cool."

Makoto reached up to rub the scar on the back of his head, the pain suddenly unbearable. His other hand gripped the edge of the tub and he took slow deep breaths to calm his suddenly twisting stomach.

"Here! I want you to have it."

"What? Me? Why?"

Why?

Why did he want to give that little toy away?

What was his purpose?

"Because I wanted to win it for you!"

Makoto's fingers dug into his scar, desperately wanting to rip out the pain that was throbbing in his skull.

"You're my best friend, % $-chan!"

"%@$-chan…"

"Ha…-chan."

"Haru-chan!"

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto gasped and leapt jumped back from the tub, panting and holding his chest. He gripped his shirt and forced himself to breathe through his nose to calm himself down. His mind was suddenly muddled and his body felt sluggish, as if he had sprinted a few miles.

What in the world was *that?*

"Onii-chan?"

"We're gonna be late for school!"

Makoto squeaked and whipped his head up towards the hallway.

"Y-Yeah! I'm coming!" Makoto called back with a crack in his voice.

Makoto scrambled to his feet and grabbed onto the doorframe, leaning forward in an attempt to stifle his pants. His heart was thudding painfully inside of his chest, making his stomach burn and twist. He glanced back over his shoulder to see the little dolphin still on the faucet and he winced

when another wave of pain throbbed against his skull. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then headed out of the bathroom.

Ugh, this hurts. Why is this happening? Makoto thought. His fingers massaged his scalp as he headed to the front of the apartment. *It's those same images from before. Were those memories or… or is my brain just hallucinating?*

And why… why does that boy in those images look like Haru?

"Ah, there he is!"

Makoto snapped his eyes open, seeing his siblings looking at him as he emerged from the hallway. Haru stood next to them, his work bag in his hand. When he looked up at Makoto, his expression changed from calm to concerned, his brows pinching and lips parting.

"Are you okay?" Haru asked as Makoto got closer to them.

Makoto's hand was still kneading at his scalp but he managed a small smile and a weak chuckle.

"I'm okay," Makoto tried.

Haru's brows creased further and Makoto gulped. He obviously had not been able to fool him. Haru had never been an easy one to fool, even since they day they met.

"What's wrong, Onii-chan?" Ren asked, making both Makoto and Haru glance down at the twins.

"Yeah, you look sick," Ran added.

Great, Makoto thought with a grimace. *I can't even fool my siblings. I must look awful.*

He looked back up to see Haru staring him down, blue eyes sharp and piercing. Makoto quickly took his hand from his head and waved it in the air with a wobbly smile.

"I'm okay. Really. Just…" Makoto's eye twitched as another bout of pain flicked just inside of his skull. "Just a headache."

Haru's back straightened and he squared his shoulders, his face softening and eyes widening.

"Is it bad?" Haru asked.

Makoto waved him off again. "It'll pass. They always just come and go."

"That quickly?"

Makoto bit his lip and averted his eyes, glancing around Haru's apartment until he found a speck on the wall to ogle.

"Sometimes, yeah," Makoto answered with a quivering voice.

Haru's lips pulled to one side, looking unconvinced, but he remained silent as he bent down to pick up Makoto's bag.

"I'll carry this for you, then," Haru said, hoisting the bag over his shoulder.

Makoto sputtered and took a step forward, reaching out to stop him.

"W-Wait, Haru! You don't have—"

"It's fine. We're both going to the same place anyway," Haru said, turning towards the door. "C'mon, we're going to be late."

Haru opened the front door and walked out into the hallway with the twins following. Makoto huffed out an embarrassed sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. He glanced back in Haru's apartment one last time before heading out into the hallway, leaving that little keychain behind.

"You really don't have to do that," Makoto said softly as they left the apartment complex and walked out onto the sidewalk. The twins walked a few paces in front of them, out of earshot. "My bag isn't too heavy, I can carry it."

Haru shrugged the bag more over his shoulder, his gaze staring straight ahead.

"Well, if it's not too heavy, then I don't mind carrying it," Haru said.

Makoto pouted, frustrated that Haru was able to twist his words. He suddenly felt like a child.

"The walk to work isn't too long. And besides," Haru started, his eyes cutting to the twins before turning to look at Makoto, "You look really pale."

"I… I do?" Makoto asked, reaching up to touch his neck. He *was* really sweaty.

Haru nodded once and then turned his head to gaze in front of him again. Makoto pulled his lips to the side and wiped the sweat from his neck. His skin also felt clammy to the touch. He vaguely wondered if he was getting sick.

Makoto released another sigh as they made it to the station and boarded a train, the car shifting as it jolted forward down the tracks. Once they arrived at the correct station, the four of them headed out and down the sidewalk towards the restaurant. It was a quiet walk, the twins chatting lightly in front of them.

"Are you sure you'll be okay back at your place tonight?" Haru asked softly so the twins would not hear.

Makoto turned to look at Haru, surprised by his sudden question. He waved his hand in the air and offered a small smile.

"Y-Yeah! Of course." Makoto turned his head to look at the ground and he lifted a hand to scratch his cheek.

Haru hesitated, shifting the bag over his shoulder again before focusing on the sidewalk.

"Well, even if your power is back on, the heater might not work properly. So if it's too cold, then you can stay at my place again," Haru offered.

Makoto whipped his head back to look at Haru, his green eyes staring owlishly at him.

"Eh? Really?" Makoto asked. "We don't want to overstay our welcome. It's already been three days! I don't want to intrude."

Haru turned his head, looking at him with calm, blue eyes. It made Makoto feel warm and comfortable, the headache slightly diminishing into a tolerable throb.

"You're always welcome to my place, Makoto," Haru said. "Always."

Makoto's eyes widened as his steps slowed to a stop. He stared at the backs of his boss and siblings as they walked ahead, Haru's words echoing in his mind.

What... did he just say?

Makoto stood in front of the wooden door, his little hands wrenching the hem of his shirt. He bit his lip, his brows scrunched up in nervous concentration.

With a light sigh, Makoto finally let go of his shirt and reached forward to knock on the door. Just as his knuckles were about to tap on the door, he froze, feeling his entire body stiffen.

What if he didn't want to play? Makoto thought. We really only played that one time at the sandbox. What if he just wanted to be nice?

Makoto winced.

What if he doesn't want to play with me at all?

Makoto squirmed in his place, taking his fist back from the door. He should probably just go home and tell his mom that maybe he would try to play with the boy another day. He sighed, remembering how excited he was when he introduced his friend to his mom at the park the week before. And he was even more excited when his mom told him that the boy's family lived very close. Makoto immediately asked if he could play with the boy more often and his mother had smiled and agreed.

But now, Makoto was standing in front of the boy's door, nervously inching away from it.

He had almost convinced himself to walk back down the steps to his home and play in his room, when suddenly, the door slid open.

"Oh! You're Tachibana-kun, right?"

Makoto startled, looking up at to see a woman with black hair and a kind smile. She wore a simple, white apron and had a watering can in her hand. Makoto opened his mouth to speak but when no sound came, he nodded mutely. He had been so ready to flee earlier but his legs suddenly felt glued to the stone underneath his feet.

"I thought I recognized you!" the woman said with a smile. She turned her head back into the house. "Hey! Your friend is here!"

Makoto craned his neck to look around the woman's legs, waiting to see that familiar face. Soon enough, he heard soft footsteps tapping against the wooden floors and Makoto was met with a sea of blue. Makoto smiled brightly, lifting up a hand to wave at his friend.

"H-Hi! Um… I was wondering if you… you wanted to play," Makoto said nervously.

His friend hesitated, blinking at him quietly, and Makoto had the sudden horrific thought that he would refuse.

But his friend then glanced up at the woman and tugged on her apron.

"Can we go play in my room?" his friend asked.

"Of course," the woman said. "After I water the plants, I'll bring up some snacks."

His friend nodded at her and then gestured for Makoto to follow him. Makoto jumped and then ducked his head at the woman.

"Th-Thank you very much," Makoto said to her.

The woman chuckled lightly. "You're quite welcome."

Makoto took off his shoes after he entered the house and nervously followed his friend up the stairs and into his bedroom.

"I've got some building sets. We can make a castle like we did in the sandbox the other day," his friend said as they entered his bedroom.

Makoto's eyes widened at the suggestion. "Really?!" he exclaimed. "You want to?"

His friend stopped in the middle of his room to look back at Makoto with wide, shocked eyes.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I want to?" his friend asked.

Makoto bit his lip, suddenly feeling shy and self-conscious. He gripped the hem of his shirt again and looked down at the floor.

"Well… I wasn't sure if I could just… come visit you and stuff," Makoto explained. "I didn't know if you wanted to play with me."

"Makoto."

Makoto looked up at his friend, startled to find him scowling. Had he made him upset by his words?

"Don't be a dummy," his friend said, and Makoto deflated a little. Maybe he really should *just go home. "You're always welcome here."*

Makoto jumped, his eyes widening. "R-Really?"

His friend nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Always."

Always…

"Makoto?"

So… Makoto could come over whenever he wanted?

"Makoto!"

Makoto felt himself smile, relieved that his friend actually wanted to play with him!

This was the best day of—

"Oi! Makoto!"

Makoto jumped as he felt the weight of two hands clapping down on his shoulders. He blinked until he was met with those two familiar blue orbs staring back at him.

What?

What… was all that?

Where did his mind go just now?

And…

Why did all of that feel so… familiar?

"Makoto?!"

Makoto jumped again, focusing back on the person standing in front of him. Once his vision became completely clear, he recognized his boss' face. His brows were creased and twisted with worry and his blue eyes resembled a stormy sea.

"What's wrong?" Haru asked, his hands gripping Makoto's shoulders.

Makoto blinked again, looking at Haru quizzically. What did he mean by that? Was there something wrong with him?

Where… where was he?

"*Makoto!"*

Makoto jumped for a third time and focused back on Haru's face. His boss was starting to look panicked, the white of his eyes becoming more visible as they widened.

"Are you okay, Onii-chan?" Ran asked from behind Haru.

Makoto could barely see the twins standing behind Haru, but he could tell that they had worried expressions on their faces.

"I… I'm fine," Makoto said finally. He tried to move but Haru's grip on his shoulders was firm, not letting him move an inch.

"What?" Haru asked. "You… you stopped walking and… you just stood there. We called you for several minutes but you didn't say anything."

Several minutes? Makoto thought. *Did I… black out?*

Makoto shook his head, trying to dispel the terrifying thought. He was just stressed. Nothing more to it.

"Ah, sorry," Makoto apologized, suddenly feeling frazzled. "I must've been… just deep in thought."

Haru blinked at him, his brows pushing together incredulously.

"Deep in thought?" Haru asked.

Makoto tried for a smile but it felt fake and fragile, ready to crumble at any given second.

"I'm just… stressed, you know? Have a lot on my mind," Makoto answered.

He tried to get out of Haru's grasp again but his boss just pressed down on his shoulders harder, forcing him to stay put.

"It was more than just being deep in thought," Haru said. "You weren't moving or responding… I thought you were going to pass out."

Makoto's jaw dropped. He had not heard Haru sound so passionate before. He cleared his throat and tried to push past the fog that had suddenly clouded his mind.

"I'm okay," Makoto insisted, reaching up to touch Haru's forearms to try to gently nudge them off of his shoulders. "Really. I think I was just out of it for a while."

"Maybe you should rest today," Haru said.

Makoto shook his head to protest but immediately regretted it. It felt as if his brain was rattling around inside of his head like loose change. He stilled his head and tried for another smile.

"I've had all weekend to rest," Makoto said. "I'm fine."

Haru did not look convinced.

"I don't think you should work today," Haru said. "I'll drop off the twins and pick them up. You should go back to my apartment."

Makoto felt a spike of panic rush from his chest and down his spine. If he did not work, then he would not get a paycheck. He needed to get to work so he could have enough money for a new apartment. He was quickly running out of time and he needed to work as much as possible. He could not miss even a single day of work.

Makoto gripped Haru's forearms and shook his head, ignoring how much it pained him.

"N-No! I can work," Makoto said, still fighting against the fogginess in his mind. "I just needed a minute."

Haru's face twisted into a grimace, his fingers digging into his broad shoulders.

"Makoto, you… you really didn't look okay," Haru concluded.

Makoto's breath hitched inside of his chest and he bit back a grimace of his own. Instead, he widened his lips in a smile and tugged Haru's hands off of his shoulders. Haru's eyes almost looked betrayed as he watched his own hands lower down by his sides.

"I'm fine," Makoto said, desperately trying to ignore the headache booming at the back of his skull. "Thanks for worrying about me, Haru."

He tilted his head, brandishing a genuine smile, but Haru stared back at him with concern still written on his face. Makoto felt a weight on his chest but he forced the smile to stay on his face.

"We should get going. We don't want to be late," Makoto said, walking past Haru. He placed his hands on Ran and Ren's heads and started to guide them along the path.

"Are you sure you're okay, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, looking up at him with worried brows.

Makoto patted the back of her head and nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Makoto assured. "Now, let's get you guys to school."

The twins exchanged worried looks before turning their heads to look down the path.

Makoto breathed out slowly, relieved that the tense moment had passed. He peeked over his shoulder to look at Haru, flashing him a quick smile to try to wipe the frown off of his boss' face. But Haru's lips were firmly pressed together in a straight line while his brows still creased in slight worry.

Get ahold of yourself, Makoto thought to himself, turning around to walk next to his siblings. *Think of the twins and that new apartment. Do it for them.*

Makoto could feel his boss' eyes on him throughout the day. It was embarrassing, especially since the mind-numbing fog had finally cleared up two hours into his first shift. He had to reassure Haru that he was fine and that he did not need to sit down or rest. He did not want to lose those precious hours that Haru had finally agreed to give him.

When his second shift was over, he had grabbed the twins from the break room and led them to the kitchen to see Haru before they left.

"Ah, Nanase-san!" Ran called, rushing into the kitchen. Ren rushed in after her and they both collided with Haru's waist, their arms wrapping around him.

"Thank you for letting us stay with you," Ran said cheerfully.

"A-And thank you for helping me with my painting," Ren said.

Haru looked surprised at first, but his face softened and he even managed a smile. He placed his hands on their shoulders.

"You're welcome," Haru said. "And you guys can come over any time." He glanced up to look at Makoto, his gaze pointed and firm. "As long as your brother finds the time to visit."

Makoto smiled, rubbing the back of his neck as his siblings looked up at him pleadingly.

"Maybe we'll visit on the weekends, or something," Makoto said quietly.

His answer seemed to satisfy the twins as they smiled and gave Haru one last hug before separating and heading out of the kitchen. Makoto was about to follow but he felt a hand on his shoulder, making him stutter to a stop. He turned around and saw Haru staring back at him, his gaze more solemn than before.

"I was serious this morning, you know," Haru said. "If your apartment is too cold or if the power hasn't really turned back on, then come over. You don't need to ask permission."

Makoto smiled, tilting his head slightly. "Thank you, Haru. I'll definitely call you if the apartment isn't ready."

Haru's arm dropped from his shoulder and Makoto bowed his head once in a polite goodbye before he turned to exit the kitchen. Just as his hand touched the door, he heard Haru take in a sharp breath.

"And even if the power *is* working," Haru started, making Makoto turn his head back to look at him, "You're still welcome to stay."

Makoto's chest felt warm at the kind gesture, and he smiled at Haru. He nodded once at him, being careful with his headache, and hummed.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto said. "I appreciate it."

Haru hesitated for a moment and then hummed, nodding back at him. Makoto smiled and turned to leave the kitchen, pushing the swinging door open.

"See you tomorrow!" Makoto called to him as he left.

"Yeah. See you," Haru called back.

Makoto left the kitchen and headed to the front of the restaurant, where Ran and Ren were chatting with Nagisa and Rei.

"And Rei-chan stood up in the middle of class, and the teacher asked him if he had to use the restroom!" Nagisa chirped, bending over to clutch his stomach in a high-pitched laugh.

"N-Nagisa-kun!" Rei said in a loud whisper. "Must you tell that story to them?!"

Nagisa wiped the tears from his eyes and tried to calm himself down.

"But *Rei-chan*," Nagisa said through his chuckles, "It was *so funny!"*

"*Nagisa-kun!"*

The twins looked like they were about to burst into laughter themselves but they were holding back, probably for Rei's sake. Makoto internally thanked them for their attempt at restraint and respect.

"Oh! Hi, Mako-chan!" Nagisa greeted, straightening his back. "Going home?"

Makoto nodded and hummed. "Yeah, finally heading back today."

"You were staying at Haruka-san's apartment the past few nights, correct?" Rei asked as he adjusted his glasses.

Makoto nodded. "It was very kind of him to offer while our power was out."

The bright smile that had once been on Nagisa's face suddenly fell and he tilted his head up to look at Makoto's face.

"You guys are doing okay, right?" Nagisa asked quietly.

Makoto's brows rose in surprise, thrown off by the sudden change in mood.

"Um, yes," Makoto answered with a wobbly smile. "We're doing fine."

Nagisa and Rei exchanged looks that Makoto could not decipher. Then, they looked back at Makoto and they both smiled, their smiles not as wide as earlier.

"Well, that's… that's good," Rei said, a little awkwardly.

"Yeah. We're glad," Nagisa added.

Makoto smiled politely at them, suddenly feeling exposed and vulnerable.

"Well, we should get going," Makoto said. He bowed his head to them. "Have a good night."

"Ah, yes! Take care, Tachibana-san!" Rei said, bowing his head back.

"Bye-bye, Mako-chan! Bye, Ran-chan, Ren-chan!" Nagisa chirped.

"Bye-bye!" Ran and Ren said with a light wave.

Then, the three of them left the restaurant, the door closing behind them softly. Makoto took a deep breath as soon as he was out, feeling the fresh air hit him. He could finally breathe.

Once he had regained both his breath and composure, he glanced down at the twins with a smile.

"All right. Let's go see if the apartment is working again," Makoto said.

"Ah, do we have to?" Ran whined.

"Of course we have to," Makoto answered.

"Aw."

"At least we'll have more clothes," Ren said softly.

"Yeah, I guess that's true," Ran agreed.

Makoto smiled, thankful that the twins were trying. Their thoughtfulness alone almost made him tear up.

They had grown so much in the past few months that Makoto hardly recognized them.

After walking a few blocks and crossing a few streets, they had finally arrived at their old, worn-down apartment complex. Makoto could not even hide his grimace as he walked up the dingy steps to the correct floor. He had been utterly spoiled the past few days.

Makoto inserted his key into his apartment and turned, opening the door to the apartment. When the door opened completely, the three of the collectively sighed in relief.

"Ugh, finally," Ran said, walking into their apartment first.

Makoto and Ren followed in after her, both looking around to see the lights on. The air was still a little chilly but not unbearable.

"Did you guys finish your homework?" Makoto asked the twins as they took off their shoes.

"I've got a few more problems to do," Ran said with a slight pout on her lips.

Ren nodded. "Yeah. Me, too."

Makoto glanced down at his watch and hummed, nodding only once to protect his head.

"Okay. You guys can stay up for another hour. But after that, you go straight to bed, okay?" he told them.

The twins hummed half-heartedly and dragged their backpacks, along with their sluggish bodies, down the hallway to their bedroom.

"Man, I wish we could've stayed at Nanase-san's forever," Makoto heard Ran whine down the hall.

There was a brief pause before Makoto heard Ren hum, as well.

"Yeah. I wish we could, too," Ren agreed.

Makoto heard their door shut, and then he was left in the silent living room all alone. He glanced around the small space, the walls feeling as if they would close in on him at any minute.

He sighed heavily, raking a hand through his hair and feeling the bumps of his scar on the back of his head.

Haru's place, huh? Makoto thought, absently pressing on his disfigured skull.

He turned his head to see his laptop sitting on the coffee table. After a brief pause, he shuffled over to the couch and plopped down, pulling the computer onto his lap and turning it on. He first opened up the latest listings of two-bedroom apartments in the area, scrolling through different selections.

Everything seemed too expensive, especially for his budget. He could possibly pay for the deposit, but making the monthly rent payments from then on would be an issue. He had to find a place that he could afford for a long period of time, not just the deposit.

He clicked to go over to the next page and scrolled past a few listings, but then he stopped. He leaned close to the computer screen, reading the listing over and over.

It was a new listing for a two-bedroom apartment on the third floor of an apartment complex on the other side of the train station. The price was much cheaper than the others and almost seemed… doable.

Makoto quickly opened up another tab and checked his bank account, scrolling through his payments and doing quick math to add up his upcoming paycheck.

His heart flipped and fluttered inside of his chest.

The apartment price was perfect. He could afford it.

As long as he did not make any wild purchases, he could put in a deposit at the end of next week, right before the inspection.

Makoto smiled, his hands shaking with giddy excitement as he pulled out his phone. He typed in the number for the listing agent, making a note to call her first thing in the morning.

He could do this.

He could provide.

He could be the brother his siblings needed him to be.

"Are you sure he should be working?"

"Yeah, he really… he seemed kinda out of it today, Haru-chan."

Haru bit his lip and stared down at his hands as they rested on the table in the break room. Rei and Nagisa stood in front of him, both with worried looks on their faces. It had been a long shift for everyone, it seemed. The wellbeing of their newest employee had them all a little worried and on edge.

Haru made it a point to watch Makoto carefully throughout both of his shifts, and the employee was sluggish throughout the entire day. He managed not to mess up any orders but his hands shook every time he grabbed a tray and stacked it with filled orders. It made Haru nervous every time he

watched Makoto leave the kitchen, hoping and praying that the man would not pass out on the restaurant floor.

"Are you sure he should be going back to his apartment tonight?" Rei asked Haru. "He looks like he might need someone with him. I mean… he just… he looked so…"

"Sick?" Nagisa finished.

Rei shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest.

"More like… disoriented. Or not all there," Rei said. "Is he… is he in some kind of trouble?"

"The social worker said that I needed to get a bigger apartment. One with at least two bedrooms. I've been searching for a while, but…"

Haru bit his lip, looking down at his hands on the table again.

"Yeah! He's requested to work every night this week!" Nagisa said, pointing to the schedule on the far wall. "On top of all of the hours he does in the mornings!"

"What?! Every night?" Rei asked, shocked. "That's too much!"

"It's what he wanted," Haru interjected, but his protest sounded lame and weak.

"What on earth could drive him to want to work so much?" Rei asked.

"Mmm, maybe he wants a car?" Nagisa asked.

"A car? That badly?"

"Or maybe he has a girlfriend that he wants to impress!"

"Nagisa-kun, he hasn't said a word about a significant other in his life."

"Oh, you're right. Well maybe…"

Haru listened to their bickering, his brow twitching at each crazy and incorrect guess. It made his heart ache knowing the true reason behind Makoto's insane downward spiral towards complete exhaustion.

"Um… the inspection is in less than two weeks."

Haru's brows pushed together. This was *so* frustrating.

"I'm… I'm so close. Just a few more shifts and I should have enough. I think."

Haru sighed and leaned forward until his forehead bonked on the table hard.

Why wouldn't Makoto just stay at his place?

"Eh?! Haru-chan, what's wrong?!"

"H-Haruka-san! What's the matter?! Don't tell me you're getting sick, too?!"

"Is this okay?"

"Hm? Yeah, that looks fine."

Makoto smiled as he carried over the large white snowball and plopped it onto the ground near his friend's feet. He got down on his knees next to his friend and started to search for rocks to stick into his snowball.

"I can't believe there's so much snow!" Makoto exclaimed. "I don't think I've ever seen this much snow before."

"I don't think I have, either," his friend said, smoothing out the curve of the ball. "I think the body is ready. Is the head done?"

Makoto smiled and hoisted up the snowball he had been working on. It now had two eyes and a mouth, its expression looking happy. He gently rested it onto the big, circular body and twisted it to make it stick. He took a step back and smiled.

"Wow! It looks like a person!" Makoto said with a small laugh.

"Yeah. It looks like you," his friend said.

"Eh?" Makoto squeaked. "How so?"

His friend walked closer to the snowman and pointed at its mouth.

"Its smile," he said.

Makoto tilted his head, studying the snowman carefully. Its face looked like any other snowman they had built before. The smile was made out of a few rocks, wide across the snowy ball.

"The smile?" Makoto asked, looking back to his friend with a slight pout. "Are you saying that my mouth looks like rocks?"

His friend turned back to look at Makoto, his black brow twitching slightly.

"No, dummy," his friend said harmlessly.

He turned back to look at the snowman, reaching up to nudge a loose rock back in place.

"Its smile is really big, and it makes me happy," he commented. He turned again to look at Makoto, his expression as serious as ever.

"Your smile is the same, Makoto."

Makoto jolted awake, breathing in a harsh gasp of air that burned his lungs.

The first thing he noticed was the frigid air. His bare arms were covered in goosebumps, the hairs standing on their ends. His body was trembling and his teeth were almost chattering.

And the second thing he noticed was the raging headache.

With a groan, Makoto slowly sat up, his eyes adjusting to the dark. He glanced around the small space, trying to remember where he was. He looked over and saw the familiar coffee table with his laptop and phone resting on it. His blankets were on the floor next to him, and that was when he realized that he was on the couch.

That's right, Makoto thought. *We're back in our apartment.*

Makoto rubbed his arms to warm himself up. The heat in the apartment really had not quite caught up yet. He hoped the twins were doing okay.

He reached over and grabbed his phone to look at the time. The light from the phone made his eyes squint and his headache turned sharper. He hissed and blinked several times to try to see the fuzzy numbers on the screen. It was close to five in the morning.

Makoto put his phone back down and sighed, standing up from the couch. He kept his hands on his bare arms as he traipsed down the dark hallway to the bedroom. As quietly as he could, he opened up the door to the bedroom and peeked inside.

Ran and Ren still appeared to be asleep, both of them tucked under mountains of blankets. The little space heater was in the center of the room, keeping the room tolerable.

Makoto sighed in relief. At least the bedroom was not as frigid as the living room. He quietly shut the door and turned back to head to the kitchen. Since he was awake, he might as well get everything ready for the day.

He opened the pantry to look for food to pack for the twins for their lunches, but his stomach dropped when he saw that it was half empty.

They had truly been spoiled living at Haru's place.

Makoto rubbed his hand down his face and sighed, looking at the ingredients inside. He leaned forward and studied the amount of rice they had left. They did not have much left, the sight making Makoto's chest clench. He could probably whip up some rice for them and maybe get some veggies cooked. He could use that method Haru had shown him a few weeks ago.

But Makoto knew he had to go grocery shopping this week if they wanted to make it to the end of next week. He quickly did the math in his head, adding up the prices of ingredients and subtracting them from his account. He nodded to himself when he came up with an agreeable number.

He could make it work. But it would just mean that he would probably have to skip a few meals to make ends meet.

Makoto sighed again and relented, grabbing the rice. If going hungry meant that he could keep the twins, then he would rather be hungry for the rest of his life. He was determined to make this work, no matter the cost.

"Waiter! Could I get a refill, please?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, I'll be right there."

"Excuse me, but we're ready to order."

"Right. I will be with you in just one moment."

"Waiter, we need more wine at our table."

"I will be right back with another bottle. Just give me one moment."

Makoto ducked into the kitchen and slouched against the wall, feeling the fatigue catching up to him. He rubbed his temples, the headache that he had woken up with a few days ago still not

dissipating. The pain was still throbbing and, at times, made his ears pound.

Five days.

He only had five days left until the inspection.

Four days until he would meet the agent at the new apartment to sign a lease and pay his deposit.

He had to press on. There was no time to slip up.

Makoto had carefully calculated each of his payments throughout the week, even down to what he would buy at the grocery store. He could not spend another yen nor could he miss a single hour of work. He had to keep working his shifts if he wanted enough money for the deposit.

He took a step forward but the ground beneath his feet suddenly shifted. He stumbled forward, preparing to tumble to the ground, when two hands braced his shoulders and kept him steady on his feet.

"Makoto!"

Makoto gasped and glanced down to see Haru staring up at him, his eyes wide and concerned.

"What happened? Are you all right?" Haru asked.

Makoto's mouth went dry as he tried to answer. He swallowed and then nodded, lifting a hand to touch his tender head.

"Yeah, I think… I think I'm just a little tired," Makoto explained, trying to smile once again.

Haru winced, hesitantly letting go of Makoto's shoulders and taking a step back to give him space.

"Go take a break. We'll cover your tables," Haru said.

Makoto's stomach tumbled and he shook his head.

"I'm okay. Just… lost my footing for a second," Makoto explained.

"It's not a *suggestion,"* Haru threatened, his brows lowering and voice harsh. "Go take five minutes to just sit and drink some water. Eat a protein bar, too. There should be some in the break room."

Makoto opened his mouth to speak.

"But—"

"Go."

Haru pushed Makoto's back until he was out of the kitchen and on the restaurant floor. When Haru ducked back inside the kitchen, Makoto sighed and gave in, turning to head down to the break room. He turned the door knob and walked inside the quiet room, instantly feeling a little relief.

His siblings were sitting at the table as usual, both of them working on homework. Makoto walked over to them and plopped down next to Ran, leaning over her shoulder to peek at her work.

"What are you working on?" Makoto asked.

"Literature," Ran answered, lifting her head up from her textbook.

Makoto's chest immediately filled with warmth and he managed a smile, even though his headache protested against it.

"Ah, I love literature," Makoto said. "What are you studying?"

Ran smiled and pushed her notes over to him to show him, Makoto recognizing some of the topics. He smiled and nodded, letting her know that he could help if she got stuck.

Then, Makoto turned his attention to Ren, who was looking at an art history book.

"And what are you looking into, Ren?" Makoto asked, leaning over the table.

Ren glanced up from his book and then pushed his textbook over for his brother to see.

"I'm looking at different paintings to get an idea of how I want my river to look," Ren explained.

"Your river?" Makoto asked, looking down at the pictures in the textbook.

"Mhm. Some rivers are shiny and reflective, while others are more white and blue. I'm trying to decide how I want it to look," Ren explained. "So, I decided to look at what other painters did to get a better idea."

"I see," Makoto said. "That's a pretty good idea."

He studied some of the paintings on the page, paying close attention to the rivers. Ren leaned over the table and turned the page, pointing to one of the paintings at the bottom of the page.

"I really like this one because it has a bridge reflected over the water," Ren said. "So I'm leaning more towards that."

Makoto looked at the picture, his heart fluttering.

It was a simple bridge over a river.

Nothing to it, really.

But why did it make Makoto feel like throwing up?

"A bridge, huh…" Makoto mumbled, his brain starting to drift.

"Yep!" Ren said proudly. "I might not paint a bridge, though. I haven't decided yet."

Makoto hummed absently, staring at the picture as if entranced.

"A bridge… over a river…" Makoto mumbled. "That… that seems… familiar…"

"Hey… hey!"

Makoto shook his friend's shoulders, begging him to wake up. But his friend did not move an inch, save for his chest's gentle rise and fall with each labored breath. Makoto's hands gripped his friend's shoulders as tears filled his eyes. A sob escaped his mouth and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"No… no, no, no," Makoto whimpered.

He could hear sirens wailing in the distance, each wail getting louder and louder.

"Please, please, wake up!" Makoto begged. "Don't leave me!"

There was a commotion behind him as the sirens got loud and then stopped. He heard doors slamming closed as well as people speaking, but Makoto did not dare look up. He did not let go of his friend and he did not move. Instead, he opened his eyes to look down at his friend's blurry face.

"Please wake up!" Makoto shouted. "HARU-CHAN!"

"Over there! Grab the stretcher!"

Makoto could hear the soft footsteps in the grass as someone approached the edge of the river. A man quickly came into view, kneeling down beside his friend's lifeless body and placing two fingers on his neck.

"I've got a pulse, but it's weak!" he called over.

A few more men crouched down by their sides, a stretcher in their grasp, and started to pick up Makoto's friend.

Makoto panicked, his hand latching onto his friend's wet sleeve.

"W-Wait! Ha-Haru, he—"

"He's going to be all right," the man said, placing a hand on Makoto's shoulder. "But we have to get him to the hospital."

Makoto whimpered, feeling his body trembling all over.

"B-But…"

Makoto did not know what to do. He felt so lost and helpless, his best friend's body unresponsive and cold. He wanted to see his blue eyes open and he wanted to hear his voice.

Makoto did not know what would happen if he could never see his best friend again.

"C'mon, son. Come with us."

Makoto jolted out of his daze and stared up at the man, tears still flowing freely down his cheeks.

"Huh?" Makoto squeaked.

"Ride in the ambulance with us to the hospital so you can be with your friend," the man said.

The man hauled Makoto up onto his feet and wrapped a protective arm around his shoulders to guide him towards the ambulance by the road.

"We'll call yours and your friend's parents when we get there, okay? Just ride with him and keep him company."

Makoto sniffed and then nodded, feeling his stomach turn heavy like lead.

He watched as his friend was lifted into the ambulance and then he climbed in after him. Once they were secure, the ambulance took off down the road, the siren blazing overhead.

The man in the ambulance placed an oxygen mask over his friend's mouth and the sight of it sent a violent shiver down Makoto's spine. His body began to shake uncontrollably and he reached out to

grab onto his friend's sleeve. He could feel how cold the skin was underneath the damp sweatshirt.

"Haru-chan… H-Haru-chan…" Makoto whimpered, unable to control any of the shivering. It made his teeth chatter with each word.

"Tachibana-san…"

"H-Haru… please wake up, Haru-chan…"

"Mako-chan?"

"Please!"

"Onii-chan!"

Makoto sucked in a quick, sharp breath, startling out of his memory.

He squeezed his hand, expecting to feel a cold, wet sleeve, but he instead felt the pages of a book. He blinked rapidly to see a picture of a bridge over a river on the page.

Wait, this is…

"Onii-chan, what's wrong?"

Makoto sucked in another breath and glanced up, seeing four pairs of eyes staring back at him.

Huh? Rei and Nagisa? What are they doing here?

"Mako-chan, are you okay?" Nagisa asked, leaning forward on the table. "Haru-chan sent us to find you when you didn't come back for your shift."

As the words slowly processed in his brain, Makoto's heart did a strange flip and he felt his eyes grow wide.

"How… how long have I been gone?" Makoto asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Well, Haruka-san said that you had been missing for fifteen minutes," Rei answered, placing his hand on his chin. "He managed to catch both of us in the kitchen and he asked us to come and get you."

"Fifteen minutes?" Makoto asked, blinking up at Rei in confusion. "I… I was gone that long?"

"You looked really out of it, Onii-chan!" Ran said, her hand reaching up to tug on his sleeve. "You weren't talking or saying anything. You just sat there and stared at the book."

She pointed to Ren's textbook that sat on the table in front of him, the pages still opened to the rivers and bridges section. Makoto's eyes were drawn to the bridge painting, making his stomach clench. He could almost feel himself beginning to shake again, just like he did in the ambulance ride in that strange vision.

"We tried calling you, but you didn't answer," Ran continued. "Ren even tried shaking you but you didn't even move."

Makoto lifted his head to see Ren sitting next to him, the corners of his eyes spotted with tears. He looked frazzled, to say the least, but he was not crying as much as he used to. But the tears were still there, brimming and ready to spill over. Makoto winced and reached out to touch Ren's shoulder. He gripped it firmly when he felt his hand shaking.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," Makoto apologized, and Ren nodded shyly, biting his lip.

"Are you all right to go back to work?" Rei asked, his brows pushing together in concern.

"Yeah, you don't look so good," Nagisa said, his face uncharacteristically sad.

Makoto tried for a smile and shook his head, lifting a hand to wave them off.

"I'll be fine," Makoto said as he stood to his feet. "Well, I took too long of a break. I hope Haru isn't too mad," he said with a chuckle. He glanced down at Ran and Ren, hoping his appearance would keep up. "I'll be back once my shift ends, okay?"

Ran and Ren hesitated for a moment, both of their faces still scrunched up. And without a word, they both nodded, and Makoto tried to make his smile wider. He turned around to face both Nagisa and Rei.

"Thank you for coming to get me," Makoto said, and then he carefully brushed past them to exit the break room. He thought he could hear Nagisa calling after him but his ears were still roaring with his own heartbeat that it was hard to tell.

He went back into the kitchen and leaned down to grab a tray, ready to receive the orders for one of the tables. When he leaned back up, he was met with a pair of blue eyes.

Makoto froze, the blood in his veins turning to ice.

"Please, please, wake up!"

"Don't leave me!"

"Please wake up…"

"Haru-chan!"

"Makoto?"

He jumped, the voices fading into echoes in his mind. He locked his eyes with Haru again, trying to shake the horrifying image of the boy lying lifeless along the riverside.

It's just a strange vision. It's not real, Makoto told himself. *It's just stress related. It has to be.*

"Are you okay?" Haru asked.

Haru looked ready to leave his station in the kitchen and Makoto quickly put up his hand to stop him. He offered his boss a lopsided smile and shook his head.

"I'm fine. Sorry I took so long on my break! I must've… lost track of time," Makoto apologized.

Haru blinked at him, and then his face twisted into concern. He was about to speak but Makoto beat him to it, not wanting him to ask if he was all right. He just wanted to get back to work. The sooner he could work, the sooner he could distract his mind from the images bouncing around in his head.

"I have to take these orders out now," Makoto said suddenly, reaching forward to grab the plates of food. "See you later, Haru!"

He flashed Haru one more smile to *hopefully* placate his boss of the worries. But he caught the look on Haru's face as he exited, and his stomach turned to lead. For the remainder of his shift, Makoto could only see his boss' worried face along with that boy who was limp by the riverside.

It's just stress, Makoto told himself. *Just… stress.*

"Oh, my sparkler ran out."

"Here, light a new one with mine!"

"Ah, thanks, Makoto."

"Yeah!"

...

"Uwah! That dog is scary!"

"D-Don't cry, Makoto. Here, I'll get it away."

"Th-Thank you…"

...

"Whoa, all the leaves are on the ground!"

"It's getting colder, too."

"You're right, it is… Oh! I know! Let's make a pile of leaves and jump in them!"

"Why?"

"Eh? What do you mean, why? It'll be fun!"

"Sounds like too much effort."

"Oh, c'mon! It'll be fun! Let's do it!"

"…Fine."

Makoto slowly opened his eyes after the third night in a row of endless dreams and strange visions. Every new vision would cause a headache, each more painful than the last. The headaches were usually dull in the mornings and then would grow stronger as the day went on.

But on this cold morning, the headache was relentless. The pain bloomed to his eyes and radiated all the way down to his teeth. All he wanted to do was roll over on the couch and go back to sleep, but he even worried that the pain would keep him from falling back asleep.

So with a heavy sigh, Makoto forced himself up. The living room spun almost violently as he tried to stand up and onto his feet. He wobbled down the hallway, the dizziness hitting his too-empty stomach painfully.

When he finally managed to stumble into the bathroom, his stomach turned dramatically, and Makoto could feel the bile rising up his throat. He fell on his knees in front of the toilet and retched, expelling what little he had in his stomach.

Ugh, it hurts… Makoto thought, pressing his hand to his abdomen.

After a few more retches, Makoto flushed and then sat back against the wall, letting his head fall back and bump the wall. It sent a sharp pain through his skull and down his spine, making him hiss and grab at his hair.

This can't be happening, Makoto thought. *I have to get to work today. I have to. I have to meet the agent tomorrow to pay that deposit. I need every hour of work to afford it.*

Makoto groaned, tugging on his hair and begging for the throbbing to stop. After a few moments, the dizziness slowed, and Makoto was able to stand up and lean his weight against the sink. He looked at himself in the mirror, grimacing when he saw the dark circles under his eyes and the sheen of sweat that coated his neck and forehead.

He took a slow breath through his nose to calm his pounding heart.

It'll pass, Makoto thought. *I just have to get to work and—*

"Haru-chan!"

A spike of pain pinched the back of his head, sending tingles down his neck. He gasped and reached back to hold his head, his palm covering his scar.

"Please wake up!"

Just ignore it, Makoto told himself. *It's just stress.*

"Don't leave me!"

It's not real.

"HARU-CHAN!"

It's. Just. Stress.

Makoto held his head and panted, waiting for the flashes to wither down and fade. He shut his eyes tight until he could not hear his own voice echoing in his mind. After a few moments, it was finally quiet.

He took more slow breaths through his nose to calm down. His body was covered in sweat and was starting to shiver. He leaned down to the sink and splashed his face with some water.

Just have to get through this day, Makoto thought. *Once this day is over, then I can relax.*

Makoto leaned back up and stared at himself in the mirror.

I can get that apartment.

Makoto managed to bypass Haru that morning.

Haru was busy talking to the other chefs that morning for some new recipe he had wanted to try,

and Makoto used that opportunity to sneak to the back to unload the truck. He did not want to worry his boss any further than he already had. And he was slightly worried that Haru would try to send him home again.

His head was still aching. The sharp pain had not dissipated since he had woken up. Fortunately, the room did not spin as much anymore.

Gathering the boxes of ingredients into his arms, Makoto slowly made his way up the stairs and plopped them down next to the pantry. The steps swayed each time he moved his foot up and he almost tumbled down the stairs completely. He was grateful that his balance decided to give him an extra boost that day.

With each new box he brought into the pantry, he could feel his limbs getting heavier and heavier. His eyes started to throb with each pulse and his back was drenched in sweat. It had only been an hour and Makoto was already exhausted.

Push through the pain, Makoto thought. *I need these hours. I can't just quit now.*

When he finally grabbed the last box, he carried it up the steps and into the kitchen. But instead of heading straight for the pantry, he collided with a smaller body, the other person slightly yelping as the corner of the box smacked against their elbow. Apologies were already flying off of Makoto's tongue before he could turn to see who he had run into.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I—"

Makoto stopped his blabbering when he was met with piercing blue eyes. Seeing the sudden change in color almost made his headache worse.

"Oh. Haru, uh… I'm sorry for running into you," Makoto said with a light smile.

Haru was looking down at his elbow and massaging it lightly, a small pout on his lips.

"It's fine," Haru started. He dropped his hand back down by his side and glanced up at Makoto. "Just watch where… Makoto? Are you all right?"

Makoto's smile fell and he bit back a groan. He was really tired of people asking him that.

"Yes," Makoto answered. "I guess I didn't get enough sleep last night."

Haru's brows lowered and his lip pulled to one side, looking unconvinced and strangely scared.

"You… you look really sick," Haru commented. He stepped forward and raised his hand towards Makoto's face. "Are you running a fever?"

Makoto's breath hitched as he felt Haru's hand come up to touch his forehead.

He won't let me work if I'm sick, Makoto thought. *I just need to get back to work!*

Makoto stuttered back a step and offered him another smile. He could feel a bead of sweat slide down his neck. It made him shiver.

"I'm fine, Haru. I just didn't sleep at all last night," Makoto said.

Haru remained frozen in place, his hand still up in the air for a moment. When he dropped his hand by his side, his face fell and he suddenly looked frustrated.

"Are you lying?" Haru asked.

"No," Makoto said truthfully. Even if it was not the whole truth, he at least was not flat-out lying to his boss.

But Haru sighed and averted his eyes, looking a little frustrated.

"Fine," he said in a small huff. "Do what you want."

Makoto stood frozen in place watching as Haru walked back to the kitchen without another word. He shifted his weight back and forth for a minute, feeling a little lost, and then he hurried off to the pantry, leaving Haru to do his own job. He would probably have to apologize to Haru later. But for now, he had a job to do.

Once he was next to the pantry, he placed the box down beside the door and walked inside. He was surprised to find one of the chefs standing in the middle of the pantry, his eyes scanning the shelves. When Makoto walked in, the chef turned and smiled at him.

"Ah! Just the person I'm looking for!" the chef said. "I'm needing some ingredients but I can't find them."

Makoto's brain slowly processed his words, his mind fighting to stay focused on the task at hand.

"Um… what are you looking for?" Makoto asked.

"I need ground ginger and brown sugar. I looked at the shelves where they usually are but I can't find any," the chef said, putting his hands on his hips.

Makoto thought for a minute and then smiled lightly.

"Ah, those ingredients just came in today. There should be some in one of the boxes," Makoto said. He gazed out at the several boxes outside of the pantry. "I can look for them and bring them to you once I've found them, if you'd like."

The chef nodded and smiled, reaching out to pat Makoto's shoulder.

"Good man! I'll be working on the fish today. You'll find me at that station," the chef said, walking out of the pantry.

Makoto watched him leave, not having enough energy to respond. Instead, he took a deep breath and headed out of the pantry to look at the stack of boxes. He glanced at each of the labels, looking for the list of their contents, but the words started to blur together.

Makoto shut his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear his vision, but it only sent a sharp pain to his head.

No, no, Makoto told himself. *Focus. Breathe and focus.*

He took slow breaths through his nose again and opened his eyes. While the headache still remained, the words were now clear and he could make out what was in each box. He found the label for "spices" and he decided to try that box first. So he lifted up the box and slowly turned towards the pantry, desperately trying to ignore how much the room spun.

The floor underneath Makoto's feet swayed with each step he took as he meandered to the pantry, the box almost limp in his hands. Once he got inside, he sagged against the wall and huffed, his

breaths ragged and harsh. He almost dropped the box in the process.

Ugh, it hurts… Makoto thought. *It… hurts…*

He sighed and plopped the box down on the floor, shaking his head lightly to try and fling off the dizziness, but the pantry only blurred further.

I've got to keep working, Makoto thought, swaying on his feet.

He braced himself against the wall, peering up at the shelves. He squinted, trying to focus on keeping the room still long enough to study the ingredients.

Okay, what did that chef say he needed again? Makoto asked himself. He squeezed his eyes shut as more pain started to throb against his eyes. *Ugh, I can't… remember… what… what was it?*

"Haru-chan!"

"Ugh," Makoto let out a squeak of pain as the voice echoed in his mind.

"Hey, Makoto! C'mon, hurry up."

"I'm coming!"

Makoto gripped his head, pulling at his hair.

"Please stop, please… I don't… I don't understand," Makoto said to the voices in his mind. "Ugh…"

The voices dissipated for a moment and Makoto panted against the wall. He massaged his head and then slowly straightened his back. He took more deep breaths through his nose and concentrated.

Ground ginger and… brown sugar. Yeah, those were the ingredients, Makoto thought.

Makoto glanced down at the box on the floor by his feet and knelt down to it again, his hands searching through its contents. He finally found a tube of ground ginger, smiling a little at finding it so quickly in the unorganized box.

He stood to his feet and turned to leave the pantry but the room spun again, making him stumble. He dropped the ginger and put out his hand to catch himself against the wall. He heard the click of the tube dropping, and once the dizzy spell passed, he glanced down at his feet. The container had broken open, little grains of ground ginger all over the floor.

Makoto sighed and shook his head, hoping that this did not cost Haru too much money.

He knelt down to the mess and started using his hands to scoop it up in his palms. The ginger was too fine and it seeped in between his fingers and back onto the ground, making little mounds.

Makoto stared at the little mounds of ground ginger.

This… felt familiar somehow.

But… why… why did this feel… familiar?

Makoto's tiny hands worked at the little mound of sand that he had formed in the sandbox.

It was a nice day out, not too chilly or too warm, but the sandbox was filled with several other kids from around the block. Makoto did not pay them much attention, all of his focus drawn to the task at hand: making the perfect sandcastle. The lump on the ground would soon be a beautiful castle. He could feel it.

Just as Makoto was about to smooth out the top, all of the kids in the sandbox stood up and pointed at something in the distance, shouting in excitement. Makoto stood up as well and watched as a large group ran out of the sandbox and through the playground to what looked like an ice cream truck.

Makoto took a step to follow, wondering where they were all going. He opened his mouth to call out to them.

"Wait!"

But Makoto's foot caught on his lump on the ground and—

FWUMP!

—Makoto was face-first in the sandbox. He sputtered, lifting his head up from the sand and just laid there in shock for a moment. Then, tears sprung into his eyes as he tried to hold back the sobs that would inevitably come. He suddenly felt so lonely and scared. Should he go find his mom? Where was she anyway?

Suddenly, a pair of sneakers appeared in front of his eyes along with a hand.

Makoto blinked, looking up at the figure in front of him.

Blue.

He was met with a sea of blue.

"Are you okay?" the boy asked him.

Makoto studied him, taking in his distinct features: his black hair, flat expression, light voice. But his eyes stood out the most to him. They were bright and beautiful, reminding him of the sky.

The boy tilted his head when Makoto did not answer but he did not take back his hand. So Makoto's lips wobbled into a small smile as he reached up to take the boy's hand.

"I think so," Makoto answered finally as he stood to his feet.

Makoto sniffed as a stray tear fell out of his eye and his breath hitched in a quiet hiccup. The boy startled, looking at Makoto with wider eyes. It made his blue eyes sparkle even more against the dusk sky.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

Makoto dusted off his knees and then wiped off the sand that had stuck to his chin. He still had tears gathered at the corners of his eyes but he looked up at the boy with a wobbly smile.

"I-I'm okay," he answered in a small voice. "I'm Tachibana Makoto."

"Oh. Nice to meet you," the boy replied.

"What's your name?" Makoto asked.

The boy blinked for a second and then faced Makoto.

"Nanase… Haruka."

Makoto gasped, jumping to his feet. He stuttered back against the wall of the pantry, staring down at the ginger.

Wait, why did that boy have the same name as my boss?

What's going on?!

What's… what's wrong with me?!

The pantry started to spin and the headache took a nosedive, sending him spiraling into a panic. He winced and reached up to claw at his head, his fingers once again digging into his scar. It felt as if his head was splitting open.

"Ah, make it stop!" Makoto pleaded, the pain starting to travel down his neck.

He turned, wanting to flee out of the tiny space. He knew the door to the pantry was close by. He could just leave and find a place to cool down. He needed to get out of that room. It felt as if the walls were caving in on him, and he feared he would be crushed at any moment.

Makoto took a jittery step towards what he thought was the pantry door, but his foot slipped on the ground ginger that was spread on the floor. He yelped and stumbled forward, bracing his arms for impact.

But on the way down, the side of his head smacked the corner of a shelf.

Makoto's vision briefly blackened before he came to. His eyes adjusted to his surroundings and he noticed that he landed on his side, his temple touching the cold cement floor. He suddenly felt tingly yet numb all over, but his headache was still throbbing against his skull and now he felt the side of his head burning. His body ached and felt too heavy to even move.

What… what happened? Makoto thought. *Did I… did I… hit my head?*

Makoto felt something trickling through his hair and around his ear. He glanced down at the floor next to his face and saw red.

There was blood beginning to pool around him.

No, don't… Makoto thought to his blood as it began to spread around the floor. *It's… It'll ruin the food. All this food will go to waste. Don't…*

Makoto dragged his numb hand up to try and stop the blood from spreading but he was too weak. He let his arm drop in the pool of blood in front of him and he let out a small whine, begging the blood to stop spreading. His vision started to blacken around the edges and his eyelids felt heavy.

Please, I… I don't want to get fired. I have to get back to work, Makoto thought as he closed his eyes.

I'm… I'm so sorry, Haru. Please… don't fire… me.

Makoto's world faded to black.

Haru bit his lip as he stirred his pot of soup, one of the new recipes he had taught his chefs that morning.

Makoto had looked completely shattered while he was unloading the truck. His eyes were bloodshot and his skin was pale and covered in sweat. Haru remembered that the inspection from the social worker was in a few days and he knew that Makoto would be concerned about that, but it was starting to get out of hand. Makoto had lost control of himself at this point.

Haru sighed.

He never should have let Makoto request for all of those hours.

"Hey, Haru-chan!"

Haru glanced up from his pot of soup to see Nagisa standing in front of him with a tray in his hands. Rei was behind him, a stack of menus in his arms.

"The new menus are ready!" Nagisa said.

Rei nodded and adjusted his glasses.

"I have added your new recipes to the menu. I went with Tachibana-san's original design choice," he commented.

Haru nodded absently, looking back down to stir his pot of soup. His stomach was too busy squirming for him to be excited about the new entrées.

"Is Mako-chan feeling any better?" Nagisa suddenly asked. "He's seemed really down all week."

"I've witnessed his off behavior, as well," Rei added, a slight worry in his tone. "There must be something we can do to help."

Haru pondered over their words. Was there really a way that the three of them could help Makoto's situation? It was not something that they could just stick their noses into. And besides…

Makoto liked doing things on his own, anyway.

Haru grit his teeth, suddenly remembering how Makoto had obviously lied earlier.

It was annoying.

Dummy, he thought. *Dummy Makoto.*

"Has anyone seen that Tachibana kid?"

Haru jumped out of his thoughts and turned his head to see one of his chefs looking over his shoulder at the rest of the kitchen. His face was pulled into an irritated frown.

"I asked him nearly thirty minutes ago to get me some spices but he hasn't come back yet! I need those *now!"*

Haru's heart skipped a beat.

Gone for nearly thirty minutes? It doesn't usually take Makoto that long, Haru thought.

He turned to the chef, feeling his hands shaking slightly.

"I'll go look for him," Haru told the chef. He turned back to Rei and Nagisa, gesturing at the spoon in his hand. "Nagisa, stir this soup."

"Ooh! I get to stir the soup!" Nagisa said excitedly.

"Rei, make sure the chefs stick to the schedule for the new recipes. We have to make sure they're ready on time," Haru said.

"Yes, Haruka-san," Rei said with a slight dip of his head.

Haru nodded at them both and practically sprinted out from his station, leaving the kitchen in the hands of his friends. He headed for the pantry, noticing that none of the boxes had been unpacked yet.

That's… odd. He's usually done with at least half of these by now.

Haru's heart was now in overdrive, pounding roughly against his ribcage and putting him on alert. He turned to look at the pantry door, seeing that it was cracked open.

Haru swallowed, inching closer to the door and slowly pulling it open.

"Makoto?" he called out, as he opened the door wide.

There was no response, but Haru nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw a pair of legs lying on the ground. Haru stepped into the pantry.

His heart dropped into his stomach.

Makoto was lying on the ground, unmoving and with blood pooling around his head.

"*Makoto!"* Haru gasped.

He rushed into the pantry and slid on his knees by Makoto's head. He studied over his face, feeling his heart hammering inside his chest. He reached down and grabbed Makoto's shoulders, gently shaking him.

"Makoto! *Makoto!"* Haru called. "Wake up! Makoto!"

But Makoto's pale face remained still and lifeless, not as much as a peep leaving his throat.

Haru felt himself begin to panic.

"Someone…" Haru breathed. He glanced back at the pantry door. "Is anyone there?! Nagisa? Rei!"

Haru was met with an eerie silence. He felt himself tremble when he did not hear a response from the hall and he lifted his hand to his mouth and bit his thumbnail, thinking hard.

What do I do? What do I do?!

Then, it hit him.

Haru hovered over Makoto's head and pushed two fingers into his neck.

A pulse.

There was a pulse.

"It's beating…" Haru said with slight relief. He sat back for a moment, just relishing in the thought that his friend had not died.

But then, his eyes caught the blood still spreading on the concrete floor. He leaned down to look for the source of the blood.

As carefully as he could, Haru lifted up Makoto's head from the ground, immediately spotting the large gash near Makoto's temple.

"Ah, there it is!" Haru said.

He gently pressed his hand to the wound to stop the bleeding. He felt a shiver run down his spine when the blood seeped through his fingers.

"C'mon, Makoto," Haru called. "Wake up, wake up…"

"Haru-chan! Where are you?! Are you in here?"

Haru glanced up at the door to the pantry, hearing footsteps quickly approaching. Then, he saw two familiar faces enter.

"Haruka-san, we heard yelling and—W-What?!"

"Haru-chan, what's—Eh?!"

Nagisa and Rei stared down at Makoto's lifeless body with horror etched onto their faces.

"Haru-chan…" Nagisa whimpered. "W-What happened? Is he…"

"Is that… is that all *his* blood?" Rei asked, looking a little queasy.

Haru took in a deep breath. He could not afford for these two to pass out, too. He had to gain control of the situation before it sent everyone into a panic.

He was so thankful that the restaurant had not opened yet.

"Nagisa, Rei, go call an ambulance!" Haru commanded.

"But, what about—"

"*Go!"* Haru yelled. "I've got him, so *go!"*

Nagisa and Rei quickly exchanged glances and nodded, scurrying out of the pantry. Haru could hear their frantic voices as they left. He knew this would cause more commotion but he would solve that issue after Makoto was taken care of.

Haru glanced down at Makoto's face, still unmoving and pale in his arms.

"C'mon, Makoto," Haru said softly. "Wake up."

His other hand gently curled around the collar of Makoto's shirt, making it wrinkle.

"Please, *please*, wake up."

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to check out my Tumblr for any updates or info regarding my fics. Ask me a question if you'd like!

Aaand if anyone would like to do any kind of art for this fic, feel free to do so! :D

Go ahead and scream it

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! Another long chapter for you :)
I'm emotionally winded from this one.

THANK YOU FOR 300+ KUDOS!!! You guys are AMAZING <3

Thank you, Tayu-chan for being an awesome editor, as always! You do a lovely job and I'm SO thankful for the work you put in! <3

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ow, ow…"

"Stay still. I can't put the bandage on it if you're moving so much."

"Ah, sorry, Haru-chan…"

"It's fine. I'm almost done."

Haru carefully held Makoto's calf, eyeing the long cut along his shin. It had already been disinfected but Makoto had been moving too much for Haru to put the bandage on. But Haru could not blame him. There was a lot of blood.

Haru, as gently as his nine-year-old body could, started wrapping Makoto's leg, being extra cautious when the bandages touched the cut. Makoto flinched every time the bandages shifted over his cut, holding back a whimper. Haru paused and glanced up at his friend.

Makoto's eyes were shut tight, holding back any and all tears from streaming down his cheeks. He was biting his lip and his hands were gripping the edge of the chair like a vice.

Haru's brows furrowed and he glanced back down at Makoto's leg to finish the bandages.

"It's okay to cry, you know," Haru said softly.

Makoto jumped, his eyes opening. He glanced down at Haru with tears brimming in his eyes.

"You don't have to hold back for me," Haru said. "Just let it out."

"Haru-chan…" Makoto whispered. He sniffed, finally letting the tears flow freely down his cheeks. He quickly moved his arm to wipe them off. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Haru said. He pouted his lips a little and concentrated back on the bandage. "I've seen you cry a bunch of times already."

"E-Eh?!" Makoto whined with a loud sniffle. "I-I don't cry that much!"

"Yes, you do," Haru said. "But it's fine. If you need to cry, then just do it. Don't ever hide if

something's wrong, got it?"

Makoto blinked at him, the last of the tears falling down his cheeks. When he did not answer, Haru looked up at him and pierced him with a pointed stare.

"Got it?" Haru repeated.

Makoto jumped and then nodded furiously.

His enthusiasm satisfied Haru, making him nod in return before tying a neat bow with the bandages on Makoto's leg.

"Good."

"C'mon, Makoto. Wake up. Please, *please*, wake up."

Makoto was still lifeless in Haru's arms, the blood seeping in between Haru's fingertips as it continued to spread across the pantry floor.

"Makoto… *Makoto,"* Haru tried again, patting Makoto's cheek.

But Makoto was out cold. The only thing that kept Haru from completely panicking was seeing the gentle rise and fall of Makoto's chest underneath his white shirt. At least he was breathing, even if it was a bit labored and shallow.

What in the world happened? Haru knew Makoto looked sick this morning, but how had Haru missed it being this bad?

Haru's hand moved down to grab onto Makoto's collar, gripping it hard. His arms began to tremble, his one hand barely able to keep still on the wound on Makoto's head. His breaths became labored as the panic settled into his chest.

"Makoto, please… *wake up,"* Haru whispered.

"Haru-chan!"

Haru snapped his head up at the sound of a familiar voice echoing down the hall. There was a pounding of feet and Nagisa came barreling around the corner, his face distressed and a little red. He rushed to Haru's side and slid down next to him.

"Rei-chan is on the phone with someone. They said they're sending an ambulance!" Nagisa said.

Haru nodded once and then looked back down at Makoto, focusing all of his energy on keeping his hand still to hold the gash on his employee's head.

"I-Is there any way I can help?" Nagisa asked, his worried eyes flickering back and forth between Makoto and Haru.

Haru bit his lip and swallowed, thinking over his offer. Makoto was still crumpled on the ground with the blood spilling out of his wound. Haru wanted to move Makoto to have him lie down on his back, but he was too scared to even move. He did not see any other injuries on Makoto but he really did not want to risk it. If Makoto had fallen, then there was a possibility that he could have injured his neck as well.

"Just stay with me in case… in case something happens to him," Haru said, feeling sick for even

thinking it. He felt his heart jump when he adjusted his hands and Makoto's head moved.

But Nagisa glossed over his internal panic and nodded, sitting down next to him. He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Makoto but his hand stayed clutched onto his pants.

"Do you know what happened?" Nagisa asked softly.

Haru sighed and shook his head. "No," he answered. "I found him like this. I'm guessing he fell."

"Fell?" Nagisa echoed, looking at Haru with wide eyes. "He fell hard enough to… to start bleeding?"

Haru winced, adjusting his hand underneath Makoto's temple. He felt a splash of blood drip down his palm and he shuddered.

"Maybe he passed out and hit his head or something," Haru said. "He looked sick all day."

Nagisa nodded solemnly and then glanced down at Makoto. His eyes shined as his face scrunched up.

"Will… will he be okay, Haru-chan?" he whimpered out.

Haru hesitated, taking note of how Makoto's breathing started to slow. He bit his lip and shook his head, his shoulders giving a light shrug.

"I'm… I don't know," Haru answered, his voice wobbling.

He suddenly felt a weight on his arm and he glanced up to see Nagisa pressing on his wrist gently. His other hand was resting on Makoto's hip, keeping his body still.

"Mako-chan is pretty strong," Nagisa said with wetness in his voice. "I'm sure he'll be okay."

Haru breathed in sharply through his nose and nodded, latching onto that small bit of confidence that Nagisa had quickly provided. He stared back down at Makoto, his hand still wrenching in his employee's shirt, and he sighed.

Where was that ambulance?!

"In here!"

Both Haru and Nagisa whipped their heads up to the door of the pantry to see Rei at the doorway, his glasses halfway down his nose and his tie crooked. He was looking out to the hallway while gesturing towards the pantry.

And suddenly, two men in blue uniforms entered the pantry, one of them carrying a stretcher. The other man lightly pushed Nagisa out of the way and reached down to lightly feel over Makoto's body. He placed his fingers on Makoto's neck just as Haru had done before.

"His pulse is weak," the paramedic said. He glanced at the head wound and then up at Haru. "How long has he been out?"

Haru blinked and then glanced down at Makoto's pale face, thinking about when that chef had spoken up about him earlier in the kitchen.

"Um… maybe 45 minutes," Haru said.

The paramedic nodded and grabbed ahold of Makoto's shoulders, easing him down from his side to his back. Haru still cradled Makoto's head gently, his palm still pressing against the wound.

"All right. We should get him to the hospital," the paramedic said.

Nagisa and Rei both gasped and whipped their heads to look at the man.

"The hospital?!" they both said in unison.

"Yes," the paramedic said, gesturing for his partner to come closer with the stretcher. "His pulse is weak and he's lost a lot of blood. It looks like he fell pretty hard. He could have a concussion."

Haru winced, thinking of the scar on the back of Makoto's head.

What if that scar had been from a concussion in the past?

Wait, isn't he not supposed to fall asleep if he gets a concussion?

What if… what if he never wakes up?

"I'll take him, son."

Haru snapped out of his thoughts as the paramedic gently took Makoto's head and turned it slowly to peer down at the gash. He pressed thick gauze to the wound, the blood immediately soaking through.

"All right. Get him on the stretcher. We need to get him to the hospital," the paramedic said.

"Right," the other medic said, kneeling down and placing the stretcher on the ground.

Haru could barely move, watching as the two men carefully rolled Makoto onto his side to slip the stretcher underneath of him. Then, they lifted him from the ground, Haru's hand slipping from his collar. They headed towards the door of the pantry, passing both Nagisa and Rei, and Haru's stomach clenched.

What if I never get to talk to him again?

What if I never get to ask him about our past?

What if I never get to see his smile?

They disappeared beyond the doorway and Haru felt a surge of panic seize his chest.

What if I never get to thank him for saving my life?

"Watch out for him."

Haru jumped at hearing that familiar voice echoing in his mind.

Yamazaki.

"I'm asking you to please keep your eyes on him and make sure he doesn't get hurt. Please."

Haru inhaled sharply through his nose, feeling his heart pound painfully against his chest.

He had already lost Makoto once.

And he did not want to be away from his side ever again.

Haru quickly jumped up onto his feet. With a few deep breaths, he shook the fears from his mind and stomped towards the door, waving for Nagisa and Rei to follow.

"Haru-chan?" Nagisa called.

"What is it, Haruka-san?" Rei asked as they headed towards the kitchen.

Haru's hands curled into determined fists, not bothering to stop or even look behind him to answer.

"I'm going with them," Haru said.

He could hear Nagisa gasp in a breath.

"Eh?!" Nagisa squealed. "You mean, in the ambulance? Right *now?"*

"Yes," Haru answered immediately.

"But, Haruka-san! What about the restaurant?" Rei asked, catching up to Haru's side. "You're the only one who knows the new recipes."

"We'll delay using the new menus," Haru decided firmly.

"W-What?!" Rei shouted, appalled. "B-But the other chefs… we… they decided to—"

"It doesn't matter what they think," Haru said, hurrying to catch up to the men carrying Makoto. He heard an undignified squeak from Rei's mouth but he chose to ignore it, rushing in his pace to walk next to the two paramedics. "Excuse me."

The men briefly looked at him, slowing down their pace for Haru to speak.

"Can I go with you? I want to make sure he's all right," Haru said.

The men exchanged looks before shrugging. "Fine. But we need to leave immediately. So don't dilly dally."

Haru felt his chest swell with nerves. He does not remember riding in that ambulance as a kid but he did remember Makoto telling him about it. It made his gut twist knowing how frightened Makoto had been in that ride to the hospital. He was just a child at the time. He could not imagine how terrified his friend had been.

Haru gulped, feeling queasy. He hoped he could keep it together for Makoto's sake.

"All right. I'll be right there," Haru said.

Haru quickly turned on his heel to rush back to Rei and Nagisa. The manager had joined them by now, all three talking in hushed voices and pointing to the front of the restaurant where the flashing lights could be seen.

When Haru stepped up to them, the manager quickly turned to him with a puzzled expression.

"Ah, Nanase! What on earth is going on here? Was there an accident?" the manager asked.

Haru nodded, suddenly feeling winded. He did not have the time to explain. That ambulance would be leaving any minute and Haru did not want to miss a chance to be by Makoto's side.

"Listen. I'm going with them to the hospital," Haru said bluntly.

The manager's face twisted from shock to horror, his eyes roving over Haru's body for any signs of injury. Once he found no injury, he glanced back up at Haru with a confused look on his face.

"Now?" the manager asked.

"Yes. I promised someone that I would watch out for him," Haru said, thinking of the promise he had made Yamazaki not too long ago.

"But what about the food you need to make today? You know those recipes better than anyone! We need you here," the manager said.

Haru took a deep breath and cleared his throat, trying to stop his hands from shaking as he looked to his manager.

"We aren't going through with the new menu today. Just go back to the old one," Haru stated.

"The old one?! Are you out of your mind?" the manager yelled. "We've been planning this for *weeks* and—"

"This is *my* decision and I'm not changing it," Haru said sharply.

The manager stared back at him with incredulous eyes, his jaw dropped and eyes wide. Haru ignored his shocked expression and quickly continued with his instructions.

"Don't use the ingredients in the main pantry. Stick with what we've got in the other pantries and the boxes in the hall," Haru explained. "Tell the chefs this. And keep the restaurant going as best as possible. Got it?"

The manager looked like he wanted to protest, his mouth opening and shutting. Haru felt his patience thinning and was about to yell, but the manager finally nodded and then turned back to the kitchen to deliver the news.

The burn in Haru's chest cooled slightly but he then turned to Nagisa and Rei, staring at them with the same intensity. He needed to leave *now.* He could not let that ambulance leave without him.

"Nagisa, Rei, I want you guys to pick up Makoto's siblings after school," Haru said.

"Huh? From school?" Rei asked.

"Can't you just go get them now?" Nagisa asked.

Haru's face twisted pitifully and he lowered his gaze. His heart was fluttering nervously in his chest.

"I'm not an emergency contact, so I don't think they'll let me pick them up early," Haru explained. He glanced back up at Nagisa and Rei with pleading eyes. "Please just do this for me."

Nagisa and Rei exchanged worried looks and then turned back to Haru with determination in their eyes. They nodded and Haru released a small breath. He turned to the side and stepped one foot in the direction of the front door.

"Take care of the restaurant until then," Haru said. "And then bring them to the hospital afterwards."

Nagisa and Rei nodded. Even though their eyes were glassy from distress, their faces were set in firm resolve.

"We'll take care of things here, Haruka-san," Rei said.

"You can count on us!" Nagisa added with conviction.

"Now, go! You need to hurry before the ambulance leaves!" Rei said.

Haru felt his eyes twitch and scrunch up. He wanted to smile but he felt his lips wobble, threatening to release a sob. He nodded instead and then turned around to hide his face.

And then, Haru sprinted.

Haru maneuvered around the waiters and busboys that were busy setting up each table and barreled through the front doors. The ambulance was luckily still parked in front, its back doors still open.

Haru rushed to the back doors and glanced inside, watching as the paramedic hooked wires to Makoto's wrists. When he caught Haru's gaze he gestured for him to come closer.

"Hurry, son! Climb in!" he shouted.

Haru did not waste another second to think about it. He clambered up the step to the ambulance and sat down on the side. His eyes were immediately drawn to the oxygen mask that was fitted over Makoto's nose and mouth, his chest still gently rising and falling with each slow breath. His white shirt was unbuttoned and his sleeves were rolled up.

Haru felt his lip twitch. He vaguely thought about how hard Makoto had worked to keep his sleeves wrinkle-free. It seemed that he was doomed to have wrinkles in his shirt forever.

Haru shut his eyes tightly and silently prayed.

If Makoto can come out of this unscathed, then I'll never get after him about wrinkles in his shirt ever again, Haru thought.

"All right, we're all set to go!"

Haru opened his eyes to watch the paramedic move to the back of the ambulance to pull the doors shut. Then, with a slight jolt, the ambulance took off down the road, jostling them with every sharp turn.

The paramedic was eyeing the monitor while holding the gauze to the gash on Makoto's temple. Haru winced when he saw a drop of blood slide down Makoto's face.

He isn't going to bleed to death, is he?

Haru's eyes stung and he lowered his head, releasing a shuddering breath. His shaking hand reached out to grab Makoto's wrist. The skin was clammy and cold, making Haru wince. He wondered if Makoto had been lying on that cold concrete floor for longer than 45 minutes, alone and bleeding from a gash on his head. How had no one noticed he was gone for so long?

What if no one had noticed?

Haru suddenly felt a twist of nausea attack his stomach and he hunched over, covering his tear-pricked eyes with his free hand. His other hand squeezed Makoto's wrist as he released another shuddering breath.

"Sorry, Makoto," Haru apologized in a hushed voice. "I'm so sorry."

After a few more twists and turns, the ambulance jolted to a stop, and Haru popped his head up from his hand. The back doors of the ambulance opened to reveal several people clad in blue scrubs. The paramedic gently pried off Haru's hand from Makoto's wrist and then stood, moving the stretcher to the edge of the ambulance.

Haru's hand suddenly felt ice cold. He jumped to his feet and rushed to hop out of the ambulance. He desperately tried to keep up with the gurney and the array of doctors that surrounded Makoto's limp body. He wanted to be by his friend's side through the entire process.

"Blunt injury to the head, no signs of consciousness for over an hour. His blood pressure is very low and his breathing is weak," the paramedic said to the doctors.

"All right. We'll need to take a look at him. Take him to bed three," one of the doctors said as they entered through the sliding doors.

"Got it," the paramedic said.

Haru felt his stomach drop as they wheeled Makoto next to a bed in the emergency room. They carefully lifted him off of the gurney and they slowly laid him on the soft, white sheets. A nurse and a doctor were next to him in a second, checking his vitals and peering down at his still-bleeding wound.

Haru stood frozen in place, his hands shaking and his legs feeling like jelly. His breaths stuttered inside of his chest, the air struggling to move through his constricted lungs.

How could he help?

What was he supposed to do now?

Was he supposed to just stand there?!

"Excuse me, sir."

Haru jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder and he whipped around to see a man wearing a white coat. He took his hand from Haru's shoulder and held it up gently.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to ask you a few questions," he said.

Haru swallowed and nodded, his eyes roving over the man's appearance. He assumed by the scrubs and the white coat that he was one of the doctors. Haru bit his lip, feeling a bit squeamish, and he glanced back at Makoto's bedside.

"Can you tell me his name and age?" the doctor asked.

Haru turned his head back to look at the doctor, his throat suddenly dry.

"T-Tachibana Makoto," Haru answered. "Um… I think he's 22."

The doctor nodded and scribbled on a clipboard in his hands. He glanced back up at Haru with a curious expression.

"Could you tell me what happened?" the doctor asked.

Haru winced and shook his head, feeling his chest squeeze slightly.

"No one knows for sure," Haru said softly. "We just… we just found him like this. We… we assume he collapsed."

Haru bit his lip, feeling lame for giving such a vague answer. He swallowed thickly and then glanced down at his shoes.

Suddenly, his breath hitched painfully in his chest.

Bright red blood had stained his white pants near his knees and shins.

Panic lodged in Haru's throat and he squeezed his hands into tight fists. They shook by his sides and he held his breath in an attempt to prevent the tremors from climbing up to his shoulders.

It did not work.

"Okay. Was he acting any differently before he collapsed?" the doctor asked.

Haru's eyes squinted as he tried to think.

Had he acted different than usual?

"Just… just a headache."

Haru's heart did a strange flutter in his chest and he quickly glanced up at the doctor.

"He complained of bad headaches," Haru said. "He… he looked really sick the past few days."

The doctor nodded and scratched his chin before writing something down on the clipboard.

"Would you know of any recent injuries that could have affected this?" the doctor asked.

Haru blinked at him.

"I… I don't…"

Recent injuries?

Besides just his strange fainting spells?

I can't think of anything really.

Makoto has never mentioned anything.

Not even any information about his headaches…

Wait.

His head.

Haru jolted, looking suddenly alarmed. He looked at the doctor, taking a step forward. He brought up his hand and pointed to the back of his own head, turning his head to the side so the doctor could see where he was pointing.

"He has a big scar on the back of his head, right along here," Haru said, moving his finger down his hair on the back of his head. "I'm not sure where it's from, but it looks recent."

The doctor was furiously scribbling down his information on the clipboard, nodding and looking

back and forth from Haru to Makoto.

"Has he lived anywhere other than Tokyo?" the doctor asked.

Haru lowered his hand and gripped the side of his pants. He gulped and nodded.

"He used to live in Iwatobi," Haru answered.

The doctor nodded again and continued to write.

"All right. Good. This information should be enough to look up his history," the doctor said. He finally looked up from his clipboard and looked at Haru with a curious expression. "Are you his emergency contact? You got here pretty fast since we just called you."

Haru hesitated, biting his lip.

Emergency contact?

Haru had looked at that information on Makoto's records before but he could not recall whom Makoto had written down as his emergency contact.

It would not be his parents, obviously.

And his siblings would not be able to do anything for him, so that ruled them out.

Maybe Makoto had an uncle or aunt?

Or maybe…

Maybe…

Suddenly, a harsh buzzing from Haru's pocket pulled him out of his thoughts. He scrambled to reach into his pocket, pulling out his convulsing cell phone. He glanced down at the screen.

Incoming call: Unknown

Something twisted in Haru's stomach.

He had a strange feeling about this.

"E-Excuse me, but I should take this," Haru said. "Please, could you let me know if something changes?"

The doctor nodded. "I will come and get you if we need you."

Haru nodded and bowed politely to the man before rushing off to the edge of the emergency room to answer the call with shaking fingers.

"Hello?"

"What the *hell* is happening to my best friend?"

Haru's blood turned to ice in his veins. He was half tempted to hang up the phone, but he knew that it would only make matters worse. He inhaled sharply and sighed to try and calm his pounding heart.

"Y-Yamazaki?"

"Yeah, yeah. It's the jerk who barged into your restaurant and caused a scene," Yamazaki snapped. He sounded winded and strained. "Now will you *please* tell me what's going on? I just got a call from some hospital saying that Makoto's been admitted!"

Haru took in a shaky breath, his heart pounding at the desperate sound in Yamazaki's voice.

"We found him on the ground at work. We… we think he collapsed and hit his head," Haru answered.

"His head?!" Yamazaki shouted, making Haru wince and pull the phone from his ear. "Is he okay? Is he in pain?"

Haru placed the phone back up to his ear and then turned to look back into the emergency room. He could spot the nurse still working on the wound on Makoto's head.

"Um… I'm not sure. He…" Haru paused as he craned his head to look at Makoto's lifeless form. "He hasn't woken up, yet."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other line.

"What?" Yamazaki said softly, his voice trembling. The despair in Yamazaki's voice made Haru's heart do a strange flip in his chest. "No… no, no. That's… that's bad."

Haru quirked a brow, eyeing the nurse at Makoto's bedside. None of them seemed to be panicked or anything. They were still just checking his vitals and pulse while stitching up the cut on his head.

"Why is it bad?" Haru asked lowly. "The nurses and doctors don't seem too upset or anything. They're stitching up his head now so he should be fine, right?"

Haru asked mostly to convince himself. But Yamazaki had sounded so upset and frightened that the peace he had felt when the doctor was speaking with him was fading, trembling fear replacing it.

"Him hitting his head is very bad!" Yamazaki nearly shouted. "He already had to deal with the injury a few months ago. He can't afford to have *two* head injuries in the same year!"

Haru's heart jolted, the fear turning into panic as he slowly started to connect the dots. The noise around him turned to static, Yamazaki's voice getting louder as he continued to rant on the phone.

"His brain could be mush by now! Or he could go into a coma or—"

"What… what do you mean?" Haru interrupted. His chest felt as if something heavy was pressing against it, making it difficult to breathe.

"You know. The car accident that killed his… anyway, *that* accident," Yamazaki said. "His skull got so banged up. It was practically in pieces."

The weight in Haru's chest caved, knocking the wind out of him. His trembling hand reached up to grip at white fabric on his chest, begging his lungs to work.

"His… his skull?" Haru rasped out.

Yamazaki inhaled to speak but then suddenly stopped, a strangled noise coming from the other line. There was a pause, Haru wondering if Yamazaki had hung up on him. But then, he heard

Yamazaki inhale, and when Yamazaki spoke again, his voice was softer and more reserved.

"Damn it…" Yamazaki muttered with a sigh. "He didn't tell you, did he?"

The panic in Haru's chest lit like a hot flame, surging up his spine and making his patience snap.

"Tell me *what?!"* Haru shouted.

He was tired.

He was tired of not knowing *anything*.

There was another pause, long enough for Haru to worry. Then, Yamazaki took in a shaky breath.

"Makoto was in the car during the accident that took his parents' lives," Yamazaki said.

Haru's breath hitched in his chest, sending sharp pains to his lungs.

It all made sense.

The scar, the headaches…

But Makoto had not once spoken about how he was involved in that accident. He only spoke of how it took the lives of his wonderful parents and how it affected their little family. Why had Makoto not said a word about any of it?

"It fractured his skull," Yamazaki continued. "They had to repair it in two separate surgeries."

It felt like a knife had twisted in Haru's gut.

Why did Haru not see this sooner?

How had he not seen the signs?

Why did Haru let him work so much…?

"He… he was in the car accident, too?" Haru asked, his mind suddenly in a fog.

"Yeah," Yamazaki answered solemnly.

Haru held his breath to stifle a sob.

"So… that… that scar on his head…"

"You saw it?" Yamazaki asked.

Haru lowered his head to stare at the floor, guilt eating away at him.

"By accident," he answered softly.

"Damn it," Yamazaki said without any real bite. "Okay, okay. I should… I should come back, right? Catch a flight? Ah, I'd have to quit the team, but… no, no. This is what's best. I should definitely come back. Let's see… I wonder if I could get any flights tonight…"

Yamazaki's voice became increasingly more panicked as he rambled on, obviously stressing himself out more and more as he spoke. It made Haru's stomach turn uncomfortably and he felt sympathy for the poor man.

What would Makoto want right now?

"I originally wanted to quit my job and come here to help him out but he refuses my help. He says he wants to do things on his own."

"So I'm asking for a favor from you."

"Watch out for him. I'm asking you to please keep your eyes on him and make sure he doesn't get hurt."

"Please."

Haru took in a deep breath to steel his nerves and calm down his pounding heart.

When he was in the hospital as a child after his incident in the river, Makoto stayed by his side until his mother physically dragged him from the room, whimpering and crying the entire way out. He supported Haru even when he got home, making sure he had enough blankets and soup to keep him warm. Makoto was there for him when he felt the most alone.

And now, Haru wanted to do whatever it took to do the same.

It was time for him to step up and be brave.

"You don't need to quit your job. I don't think Makoto would want that," Haru said.

Yamazaki sputtered. "W-What?"

"I'll watch out for him here and keep you updated so you don't have to quit," Haru said firmly.

Yamazaki hesitated, his voice stuttering incoherent noises as he tried to form a proper sentence.

"B-But… you… he…"

"I will make sure he's all right and I will not leave his side," Haru said, feeling more confident than he had the entire day. "I'm keeping the promise I made to you, Yamazaki."

Yamazaki paused and then clicked his tongue in frustration. He let out a long, shuddering sigh and then groaned lightly.

"Okay. But you *need* to call me if there are any updates. Doesn't matter what time it is. Got it?" Yamazaki asked.

"Yeah. I will," Haru said. He paused, tilting his head to the side. "How did you get my number anyway?"

Yamazaki scoffed. "Swiped it off Makoto's phone. Knew it would come in handy. That idiot always gets himself into trouble."

Haru huffed out a small laugh, the edges of his lips curling up into a fragile smile. He shook his head fondly, thankful that Yamazaki's paranoia actually proved to be helpful.

"You're a good friend, Yamazaki," Haru mentioned.

Yamazaki took in a sharp breath and then hummed quietly.

"So are you," he replied.

Haru smiled a little wider and Yamazaki coughed.

"Anyway… the doctors should be able to find his records from the Iwatobi General Hospital. They'll find the information on his surgeries from them," Yamazaki mentioned.

Haru nodded once and turned to head back into the emergency room.

"Got it. I'll let them know."

"Oh, and Nanase?"

Haru stopped short, one foot still planted in front of him.

"Hm?" Haru hummed into the phone.

One last pause, and Yamazaki spoke again.

"Thank you," he said softly, his voice so full of emotion that Haru hardly recognized it.

Haru swallowed, praying that he would be able to keep his promise to Yamazaki. He steeled himself again and stood taller.

"You're welcome," Haru said.

They ended the call without saying goodbye and Haru immediately felt exhausted and drained. So many emotions had flushed through his system that he was unsure how to feel anymore. He had even drowned out everything around him, making the busy emergency room sound like white noise.

What had he been about to do?

What did he need to do now?

Where was he going?

"Something isn't right. His blood pressure is dropping."

Haru snapped his head up, his eyes landing on Makoto's bed in the middle of the emergency room. The same doctor from earlier was standing by his side and looking at one of the screens nearby, his brows furrowed in concentration as he felt along Makoto's wrist for his pulse.

And suddenly, Haru remembered what he needed to do.

He had a promise to keep.

With a new resolve, Haru quickly jogged over to Makoto's bedside, reaching over to touch the doctor's shoulder. The doctor turned around but kept his fingers on Makoto's wrist.

"The scar on the back of his head is from a car accident. It happened about eight months ago," Haru explained. "It was a skull fracture. He had two surgeries to fix it."

The doctor's eyes widened a bit and he glanced back down at Makoto. He leaned down and gently turned his limp head to the side to study the scar, moving Makoto's hair out of the way.

"A fractured skull?" the doctor repeated for clarity.

Haru nodded and hummed. "He was treated at the Iwatobi General Hospital," he added.

The doctor straightened his back and nodded, his brows still pinched together.

"All right. This changes things," the doctor said. He glanced up at a few doctors that were nearby. "Get him in for a scan and an x-ray. This could be a difficult case."

"Right away, sir," one of the doctors said, quickly moving to unhook the wires from Makoto's arms.

"The scans should tell us what's going on. And the records from Iwatobi General should give us enough information to go on from there," the doctor said. He finally looked back at Haru and smiled at him. "Thank you. You've been a big help for your friend here."

Haru tried to return the smile but the worry clouded over his mind. He glanced over to Makoto and watched as the doctors lifted him onto another gurney and started to wheel him out of the emergency room. Haru took a step to follow, feeling panic grip his chest again, but a hand stopped him on his shoulder. He turned to see the same doctor holding him back.

"I'm sorry, sir," the doctor said. "But you're not allowed back there. You'll have to go to the waiting room now."

Haru bit his lip and whirled around. He caught one last glimpse of Makoto's unconscious body as they wheeled him through the double doors at the end of the room, quickly disappearing from Haru's sight. Haru swallowed and lowered his gaze, suddenly feeling helpless and alone.

"We'll look at him and I'll come get you when we've found out everything we need to know," the doctor said, squeezing Haru's shoulder. Haru grimaced and nodded, shrinking under his gaze. "Good. Now, the waiting room is this way."

Haru felt the doctor guide him towards the exit on the opposite end of the room. Haru turned his gaze to look back at the double doors where Makoto had disappeared earlier, his heart hammering inside his chest.

Why did you hide this from me, Makoto? Haru thought sadly as he left the emergency room. *Dummy Makoto. We promised each other not to hide anything.*

Haru grimaced and shut his eyes tight, the memory coming back to his mind. He felt tears prick his eyes, frustrated at the lack of communication between them.

Don't you remember that, Makoto?

"Oh, you got fish, Makoto?"

"Oh, yeah! Look, look! Aren't they pretty?"

"Yeah, they are. Where did you get them?"

"A friend got them for me. Look, I named that one Haruka!"

"You named one of your fish after me?"

"Yeah! See? He looks like you!"

"Huh? How so?"

"He's blue like your eyes!"

"Is that the only comparison?"

"Um… well, you both like to swim!"

"Makoto, he's a fish. He has to swim all the time."

"Hehe. I know, I know."

"Hmm. Well, if you're going to name this one Haruka, then you have to name this one Makoto."

"Oh, you think so? Is that really okay?"

"I don't see why not."

"Okay, Haru-chan! Then that'll be their names!"

"Good. You ready to go outside? My mom said they're calling for a storm later. So we should go play outside now before it starts raining."

"A s-storm? Will the thunder be loud?"

"Don't be scared, Makoto. I'll be with you if you need me to."

"Heh… okay. Thanks, Haru-chan."

"Mmn, sure. Now you want to go play?"

"Mmn! Let's go!"

"Ren!"

Ren shut his shoe locker with a soft click and glanced up to see his twin sister hurrying towards him from the hallway. She still had her school shoes on her feet as she skidded to a halt in front of him.

"So? What were the results? C'mon, tell me, tell me!" Ran asked through soft pants. Did she run all the way from her club here?

Ren paused for a moment, letting his sister breathe, and then he stood a little straighter, a wide grin on his face as he shuffled his backpack off of his shoulders. He unzipped it and pulled out a piece of paper, handing it over for her to see. Ran took it from him and studied over the paper, her eyes getting bigger and bigger by the second.

Then, finally, she reached the bottom of the page.

"Eh?!" she screeched. She snapped her head up to look at Ren with a dropped jaw.
"You *won?!* First place?!"

Ren rubbed the back of his neck shyly and averted his eyes. He chuckled softly and smiled brightly.

"Ah, yeah…" Ren said, trying to downplay it. "I guess my teacher really liked my painting."

Ran's eyes got even wider and she inhaled sharply. She spread out her arms, almost dropping the

paper, and flailed them in the air.

"Why aren't you freaking out?! You should be *way* more excited about this, Ren!" Ran said. "I mean, your painting is going to be on display for the whole school to see. This could potentially get you scholarships someday!"

Ren gingerly took the paper back from Ran's flailing hand and placed it safely in his backpack. He pulled his bag over his shoulders and gripped onto the straps, looking down at his shoes.

"I dunno. I guess it hasn't sunk in, yet," Ren said.

Suddenly, Ren's shoulders were grabbed and he was being shaken back and forth. He raised his head to see Ran holding onto his shoulders, her eyes squeezed tightly.

"Well, *let* it sink in! Right now!" Ran shouted. "You just *won.* And now we need to celebrate!"

Ren laughed and pushed his sister off of him.

"All right, all right! Just stop shaking me," Ren said. "Hurry up and get your shoes on. I wanna go tell Onii-chan."

Ran gasped and then turned on her heel to run to her shoe locker. Ren rolled his eyes and waited by the exit, the smile stuck on his face. When Ran came back with her street shoes on her feet, they both headed out of the school building and down the path towards the gate.

"Why'd you put that paper back in your backpack for?! You need to take it out to show Onii-chan!" Ran scolded.

"I don't want to lose it," Ren said with a light pout on his lips. "I'll just show it to him when we get to the restaurant."

Ran huffed. "Fine, fine! But you have to tell him when we see him!"

"I will, I will!" Ren said, the smile back on his face.

"I still can't believe you won!" Ran said. "Those lessons with Nanase-san must've really helped, huh?"

Ren nodded shyly. He could feel his chest fluttering with excitement, the nerves tingling down his spine.

"Yeah," Ren answered. "He really helped me a lot."

"You should tell him, too!" Ran said, turning around to walk backwards down the path. "He would really enjoy that."

"Oh? You think I should?" Ren asked.

Ran nodded. "Definitely," she answered. "As soon as we get to the restaurant, you should tell him. He would be happy to hear you—*oof!"*

Suddenly, Ran's back collided with something tall and sturdy, nearly knocking her over. She stuttered on her feet and hurried to turn around.

"Gah! I'm so sorry! I wasn't watching where I was going and—"

Ran's apologies died on her tongue when she looked up to see one of Nanase-san's employers standing there.

"Eh? Ryugazaki-san?" Ran asked.

Ryugazaki smiled softly down at her but his purple eyes were droopy behind his glasses, stress lines etched into the darkened skin underneath.

"Oh? Hazuki-san?" Ren suddenly said from her side.

Ran turned her head to see the blond standing behind Ryugazaki, his normal chirpy attitude nowhere to be seen. His usual broad grin had been reduced to a sheepish smile, the corners of his lips barely tugged upwards.

Ran felt something in her gut twist at seeing them both standing in front of them. Her legs froze up and she reached over to latch onto Ren's shirt.

"Um… are you picking us up?" Ren asked hesitantly, seeming to sense Ran's distress.

"Ah, yes. We are picking you two up today," Ryugazaki said.

"Oh," Ren said quietly. "Um… is there a reason why?"

Ryugazaki and Hazuki exchanged looks, their smiles fading from their faces. It made Ran grip onto her brother's sleeve tighter.

"W-Well, you see…" Ryugazaki started, but his voice trailed off.

"O-Oh, well, what Rei-chan is trying to say is that we're, uh… we need to…" Hazuki tried. But just like his fellow employee, he seemed to fall short.

Ran could not take it any longer. She turned to look at the ground, her brows furrowing.

"Something happened to Onii-chan, didn't it?" Ran asked glumly.

Both Ryugazaki and Hazuki stopped their stuttering to look down at her. Ren glanced over at her, too, but his eyes were wide with shock. There were specks of tears forming at the edges of his eyes.

"Um… yes," Ryugazaki answered. "There was an accident and…"

"A-And Haru-chan asked us to come and get you," Hazuki said. "You guys get to come with us."

"Back to the restaurant?" Ren asked, his voice wobbling dangerously.

Hazuki and Ryugazaki both winced and exchanged the saddest looks the twins had ever seen on their faces. The two employees looked back down at them, no longer hiding their forlorn expressions.

"No, Ren-chan," Hazuki said softly. "We're taking you guys to the hospital."

Ren inhaled sharply through his nose, a tremor coursing through his body. Ran's face scrunched up as she squeezed Ren's shirt in her fingers.

It was just like before.

It was just like when Sousuke had picked them up from school.

But this time, would they arrive at the hospital to find yet another family member… dead?

Ran shuddered, feeling tears prick at her own eyes. She reached up to wipe her eyes before the tears could fall and she glanced up at Ryugazaki and Hazuki, her brows furrowed and eyes fierce.

"Please, take us to Onii-chan," Ran said wetly.

Ren startled and then dipped his head sadly. Ran could feel him trembling next to her.

"Y-Yes. Please," Ren added.

Hazuki and Ryugazaki hesitated but then nodded quietly. Hazuki walked behind them and wrapped his arms around their shoulders, pushing them forward lightly to start walking in the direction of the train station. His hands squeezed their shoulders firmly and he tried to give them a small smile.

"Haru-chan is already there at the hospital," Hazuki explained. "He's probably got everything under control!"

"Oh, of course, Nagisa-kun!" Ryugazaki said, his smile more apparent on his face. "Haruka-san is very responsible. He wouldn't let anything happen to your brother."

"Yeah, yeah!" Hazuki exclaimed, squeezing the twins' shoulders again. "Rei-chan is right. And Rei-chan is *always* right."

Ran and Ren glanced at each other warily but then smiled up at the two employees, both hoping that they were right.

They finally arrived at the train station and boarded on the next available car. After a few stops, the four of them hopped off and left the station in wide strides. The two employees tried to keep the conversation light as they neared the hospital. It was something the twins appreciated. Amidst the stress of potentially losing another family member, anything lighthearted was welcomed.

Plus, Hazuki did not let go of Ran and Ren the entire walk over.

When they finally arrived at the tall hospital building, all of them frowned in worry. They walked through the sliding doors and stepped up to the front desk to ask for Makoto's name. The receptionist directed them down a certain hallway that led to the waiting area. Ryugazaki and Hazuki bowed politely to the receptionist and then led the twins down the hall.

The walk down to the waiting area was quiet. If it were not for the constant noises from ringing phones, moving feet, and busy doctors, then it would have been completely silent. The four of them were all thinking the same thing.

Was Makoto okay?

The hallway led to an open area that had tall ceilings and was filled with several benches and chairs for people to sit. Several of the chairs were occupied by tired individuals, all wearing the same tense and worried expression on their faces. Ran and Ren looked around the room nervously, Ran's hand still clinging onto his sleeve.

"Oh, look! It's Haru-chan!"

Ran and Ren looked up at Hazuki to see him pointing down the side towards the windows.

Nanase sat in one of the chairs, his back hunched over with his elbows resting on his knees. His

head was hanging and he was staring hard at the floor.

"C'mon, let's go!" Hazuki said to the twins with a small smile on his face.

The four of them hurried over to where Nanase was sitting, his appearance getting clearer and clearer as they approached.

"Haru-chan!" Hazuki called out.

Nanase looked up from the floor and his eyes widened at seeing them. He straightened his back and then stood to his feet, turning to face them as they approached.

Ren was relieved to see Nanase at first, but then he noticed the blood on the knees and shins of his white pants and he froze on the spot, feeling sick to his stomach.

"Is… is that blood?" Ren asked nervously. Ran suddenly skidded to a halt and latched onto Ren's arm, her eyes widening at the sight.

Nanase glanced down at his knees and then looked back at them, a grimace on his face. He visibly swallowed and opened his mouth to speak, but he paused, looking conflicted. He sighed and rubbed the side of his neck, averting his eyes.

"Yeah," Nanase admitted.

Ran choked on a breath and she hid behind Ren, pressing her forehead into her brother's shoulder. Ren felt tears prick at his eyes and his arms trembled by his side.

"Is that… Onii-chan's blood?" Ren asked nervously.

Nanase winced and stayed silent, and Ren's breath hitched painfully in his chest.

If that really was their brother's blood on his pants, then what in the world happened?

Just thinking about it made Ren feel sick to his stomach.

"What… what happened, Nanase-san?" Ren asked.

"Is Onii-chan going to be okay?" Ran asked from behind Ren's shoulder, her voice muffled.

Nanase opened his mouth to speak, his hand still rubbing his neck in a fit of worry. He breathed in slowly, his blue eyes lowering down to gaze at the floor.

"He… well, Makoto is…"

"Oh, there you are!"

Everyone glanced up to see a doctor quickly approaching them, a clipboard tucked under his arm. He walked straight to Nanase, his face unreadable. Nanase seemed to recognize him, though, as he hurried to meet him halfway.

"How is he?" Nanase asked, his voice higher and more panicked than before. Ren felt jittery at the sound.

The doctor pulled out his clipboard from under his arm and flipped through a few pages, nodding as he read over the results.

"Well, we did a few scans and he seems to have suffered a concussion," the doctor said.

"A concussion?" Ryugazaki asked, seeming a little alarmed.

"Is that bad?" Ran asked.

The doctor smiled at her and put up his hand to wave it gently.

"Do not fret. It's only a mild concussion," the doctor said.

"So… he's going to be okay?" Hazuki asked, leaning forward to look at the doctor curiously.

"Well…" the doctor said, looking back down at the clipboard. "He hasn't woken up yet, which is a little alarming. But since he's received a severe head injury in the past, this reaction isn't uncommon."

Ran and Ren exchanged glances, both giving each other a knowing look. They both vividly remember when their older brother had gotten that severe head injury. Neither one of them had ever wanted to see him in a similar state ever again.

But, of course, their older brother had to get himself hurt.

Again.

"I'd like to keep him here until he wakes up," the doctor said. "If he doesn't wake up by tomorrow, then we'll have to look at other options."

"Other options?" Nanase said. "What do you mean?"

The doctor eyed the twins with a guarded expression before looking back at Nanase.

"Just different treatment options," the doctor said. "You know how dangerous it can be to lose consciousness if you have a concussion."

Hazuki, Ryugazaki, and Nanase all inhaled sharply, making the twins look up at them with wide eyes and fear eating away at their chests. Ren desperately wanted to ask what the doctor meant by his words but the lump in his throat stopped his voice.

"But he looks all right for now. He's stable and his blood pressure and pulse are back to normal," the doctor mentioned.

The tension dwindled some, the group all releasing a collective sigh. Nanase stepped up closer, Ren seeing his hands curled into tight fists.

"Can we see him?" Nanase asked.

The doctor hesitated, looking at the group that surrounded him. His gaze travelled to the twins and then he scratched his head.

"Well, unfortunately, only family members can be in there at the moment," the doctor said.

Nanase winced a little, turning his eyes to meet Ren's. Ren blinked up at him almost pleadingly.

Please stay with us, Ren begged with his eyes. *Don't leave us here alone. Please.*

Nanase's eyes squinted a little before he turned his head back to the doctor, his posture

straightening. Then, he gestured with his hand to Ran and Ren.

"They're his siblings," Nanase explained. His face turned apologetic as he inhaled to say his next few words. "But they're all the family he's got left."

Ran and Ren both winced and briefly averted their teary eyes.

"I don't want to leave them alone here. So can I stay here with them?" Nanase asked.

The doctor hesitated again and Ren reached back to find Ran's hand. They immediately squeezed when their palms met. The last thing they wanted to do was stay in a hospital room all night without anyone else there. Last time, Sousuke had been there to watch over them. If Nanase could not be there, then what would they do?

But then, Nanase took in a deep breath and he bowed at the waist to the doctor, making Ryugazaki and Hazuki sputter in shock.

"Please," Nanase suddenly said in a strained voice. "Please let me stay here with them."

"Haru-chan…"

"Haruka-san…"

Ren's lips trembled at the sight. He felt his sister squeezing his hand tighter, letting him know that she was probably experiencing the same mixture of awe and gratefulness that he was feeling.

The doctor sighed and then smiled fondly, shaking his head and putting his hands into his white coat pockets.

"All right, all right. No need for that," the doctor said to Nanase.

Nanase first lifted his head to peer up at him and then he straightened his back once the doctor had motioned for him to rise.

"I'll let you stay. But you need to follow the rules, got it?" the doctor said.

Nanase nodded firmly and hummed, thanking the doctor.

"Good. I'll take you to his room," the doctor said.

Nanase nodded, thanking the doctor again, and then he turned to Hazuki and Ryugazaki.

"Thank you for bringing them here. I owe you guys," Nanase said.

"Nonsense!" Ryugazaki protested. "We wanted to do whatever we could to help."

"Yeah!" Hazuki nodded furiously. "You're like family to us, Haru-chan. And Mako-chan is now, too."

"Yes," Ryugazaki agreed. "Please take care of him and let us know if we can help out in any way."

Nanase nodded, looking touched, and promised that he would contact them if anything changed. Then, he turned back to Ran and Ren.

"All right. Let's go see your brother," Nanase said, nodding his head towards the doctor.

Ran reached down to grab Ren's hand again and they followed cautiously behind Nanase and the doctor. They stepped into an elevator that carried them up to the third floor, the doctor leading them down another hallway. They stopped at a room near the end of the hallway and the doctor slid open the door.

"Here we are," the doctor said, stepping inside first.

Nanase followed after him and the twins gingerly stepped through the doorway.

Then, they froze.

Their older brother was lying in the hospital bed, his eyes closed with a thick bandage wrapped around his head.

Ran and Ren trembled by the doorway.

The sight was too familiar, too eerily similar to what had happened only months ago. The fear they had felt that day had come back in full force, hitting them unexpectedly hard. They could both feel it in the way they were crushing each other's hands.

"Makoto…" Nanase breathed, hurrying over to the bedside. His blue eyes scanned over Makoto's body, his hands hovering over him as if even breathing on him would break him.

"You can touch him," the doctor said, making Nanase snap his head up. "Just be careful of the wires."

Nanase's face reddened and he nodded, letting his hand drop down to grab Makoto's wrist. He released a calm breath and then glanced back at the twins, nodding at them to come closer. Ran and Ren gingerly stepped towards the bed to look at their brother, taking in his pale and sweaty skin.

Ren felt tears in his eyes as he studied his brother's face. He looked the most peaceful he had been in *months*. It made Ren grimace. He hated that Makoto had to lose consciousness to gain that peace.

"All right," the doctor suddenly said, making them look up from the bed. "I'll give you guys some privacy. If there are any changes, press this button over here."

The doctor pointed to a button on the wall next to Makoto's bed and then he walked to the doorway, pausing to look back at them.

"If he wakes up, make sure he stays awake so we can check out his vitals," the doctor said. "Let us know if you need any pillows or blankets or anything."

"Thank you," Nanase said with a small dip of his head. Ran and Ren scrambled to copy him.

The doctor smiled and nodded, and then he disappeared beyond the sliding door, leaving the three of them in complete silence. They took a minute to just look at Makoto, making sure that he was even breathing. Ran kept her eyes on the monitor next to Makoto's bed, watching as the green lines bounced at his every heartbeat.

Ren carefully reached out to grip Makoto's shirt near his waist. He remembered how he had to be careful the last time his older brother was in a hospital bed. The doctor had mentioned him breaking a few ribs, so putting any kind of pressure on his torso was incredibly painful. Ren was unsure of the extent of his brother's injuries but he wanted to be cautious. Hurting his brother was

the absolute last thing he wanted to do.

"Did he… did he only get a concussion?" Ren asked, looking up at Nanase.

Nanase's hand squeezed Makoto's wrist carefully and he nodded.

"We think he fell and hit his head," Nanase answered. "We found him lying on the floor in the back of the restaurant."

"Oh," Ren breathed, lowering his gaze back to observe Makoto. His hand squeezed his brother's shirt more confidently, his heart racing inside of his chest. "When will he wake up?"

Nanase hesitated for a split second before humming thoughtfully and then releasing a soft sigh.

"We're not sure," Nanase answered.

A soft whine vibrated in Ren's throat and his shut his eyes tight to hold back the tears. It was turning out to be the same as the car accident. No one had any solid answers about his brother's recovery *again* and Ren was feeling sick to his stomach.

Everything had just started to turn around for them. The bullies finally had backed down and left him alone. Ran's anger turned into sadness and tears, which Ren could easily handle. Their bond was closer now that she was willing to open up to him.

And their brother had been so happy. Just seeing the big smile on his face whenever he and Nanase would speak would ignite a dancing flame in Ren's belly. It was almost like they had finally found their peace and rest after months of rough waters and terrible storms.

But now…

Everything was starting to fall apart again.

And Ren felt terrified.

"Don't worry."

Ren jumped at the sound of Nanase's voice. He whipped his head up to look at Nanase. His blue eyes were sharp and piercing, seeming to glow in the hospital room.

"Your brother is strong," Nanase continued, his fingers curling around Makoto's wrist. He glanced down at Ren with an intense gaze. "He'll pull through this. I know he will."

Ren shivered, feeling tingles running down his spine. The tears finally spilled over and a hiccup escaped his lips. He nodded furiously and glanced down at his older brother, reaching out with both hands to latch onto his shirt. He buried his face on the bed next to Makoto's hip.

And then he just sobbed.

"R-Ren…" Ran whimpered, sounding on the verge of tears herself.

He felt small hands rest on top of his and then a big hand patted his head. More sniffles and tears echoed in the room along with his own and he gripped his brother tighter.

Please let him be okay, Ren prayed.

Please let Nanase-san be right.

"Uwahhh! H-H-Haru-chan, that dog is s-s-scary!"

"Huh? He's just barking."

"B-But he looks mad!"

"He's not. See? His tail is wagging. That means he's happy."

"I don't want him to bite me…"

"D-Don't cry, Makoto…"

"H-Haru-chan…"

"Stay calm, Makoto. Here, stand behind me. I'll protect you."

"O-Oh. Thank you, Haru-chan…

"See? It's going away now."

"Oh, you're right. I guess he's gone now…"

"You okay now?"

"Mmn. S-Sorry, Haru-chan."

"Huh? What're you sorry for?"

"F-For crying so much."

"Huh? That's not something to be sorry for."

"Eh? You don't find it annoying?"

"Makoto, you were letting me know what you were feeling. It's not annoying to admit how you feel. If anything, it's brave."

"Oh… I guess so…"

"Don't ever apologize for doing that again. Got it?"

"Ah. R-Right. Thanks, Haru-chan."

"…It was nothing."

The sky bloomed with orange hues as the sun set behind the horizon.

As the hospital room grew darker, Haru shut the blinds and turned on one lamp, trying to keep the room dim. He glanced over at the chairs on the far side of the room.

Ran and Ren were both fast asleep, their bodies twisted up on their chairs with their backpacks supporting their heads. Both of them were completely worn out after their breakdowns. Haru was surprised by how long they lasted before collapsing on the chairs.

Haru took a long breath and faced the hospital bed again.

Makoto was still lying eerily motionless, except for the gentle motion from his chest with each breath. It had been hours and still not even a single movement from his employee. Had he really hit his head that hard?

"It fractured his skull."

Haru winced and reached up to push Makoto's bangs from his eyes, hoping that the touch would make him move or flinch. But his eyes did not flutter, his breaths remaining even.

"It was practically in pieces."

A sob bubbled up in Haru's chest and he quickly covered his mouth with his palm to stifle it and swallow it back down.

"They had to repair it in two separate surgeries."

Haru coughed as a small cry rose up in his throat. A tear escaped his eye and he furiously wiped it away with his sleeve. He held his breath to regain his composure, trying to relax his bouncing shoulders.

Once the urge to cry had passed, he sniffed and took slow breaths to calm his heart. His body was exhausted and his head was a complete mess. The entire day had been too overwhelming and he realized that being cooped up in the dreary hospital was too suffocating.

He needed a rooftop.

Haru's gaze drifted over to the twins, both of them still fast asleep on their chairs. With a deep breath, Haru reached down and squeezed Makoto's hand.

"I'll be right back," Haru said. "Stay strong, Makoto. Try to wake up while I'm gone, okay?"

Haru waited with bated breath, hoping that Makoto would open his eyes right then and respond. But when no response came, the room became even more unbearable.

He gave Makoto's hand one last squeeze before heading to the door of the hospital room. He grabbed the handle and started to slide it open, turning his head back to look at Makoto one last time, and then he left the room. He headed straight for the nurse's station, his body feeling tingly for sitting still for so long.

"Excuse me," Haru said to one of the nurses. "Is there a rooftop access in this hospital?"

"Are you okay?"

"Wow, your sandcastle is amazing, Haru-chan!"

"You think so?"

"Yeah! I mean, I don't think I could ever be as good as you. See? Mine fell over..."

"Oh… um, I can show you how to make one."

"R-Really?"

"Sure."

"Oh! Thank you so much, Haru-chan! Where do we start?"

"Are you okay?"

"Mom, I want to play with Haru-chan again!"

"Oh really? Well you know he lives right up the steps, right?"

"Huh?! Really?! Can I go see him now?!"

"Oh, sure! Of course! Go ask him to play."

"Yay! I can't wait to go see him!"

"Are you okay?"

"What? You don't want to go swimming, Makoto?"

"Huh? Oh… uh, I… not really. I…"

"…"

"Sorry. Can we play something else?"

"Sure. You wanna go play on the playground?"

"Oh, yeah! That sounds fun! Let me ask my mom!"

"Are you okay?"

"Ah, Aki-chan! Sorry! I was looking at a cat and… hey, what's the matter? Where's…"

"M-My scarf flew off a-and it f-fell and… h-he jumped in to grab it but… he hasn't come back up, yet."

"How long ago did he jump in?"

"I-I dunno… maybe a few minutes ago? Eh? Tachibana-kun!"

"Call for help! I'm going to look for him!"

"Are you okay?"

"No… no, no, no."

"Please, please, wake up! Don't leave me!"

"Please wake up!"

"HARU-CHAN!"

"Are you okay?"

"What's your name?"

"Nanase… Haruka."

Makoto gasped, his eyes flying open.

He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, his eyes wide in disbelief.

He slowly sat up, staring at the gray wall, his mind numb and in shock.

His heart was rattling his ribcage and roaring in his ears but he hardly felt it.

Haru.

The person who helped him up after he so unceremoniously ran into him outside of his restaurant a few months ago.

Haru.

The person who asked him if he was all right when he was sitting down on the cold cement crying after he lost his job.

Haru.

The person who helped him after he fainted on the street.

Haru.

The person who offered him a job at his restaurant.

Haru.

The person who showed him how to cook.

Haru.

The person who showed him how to smile again.

Haru…

"Are you okay?"

…His childhood friend.

Makoto stared at the wall, his chest heavy with shock and awe.

How…

How could he have forgotten all of that?

How could he have forgotten how inseparable the two of them were as kids?

They lived right next door!

How could he…

How could he forget his best friend?

Suddenly, there was a sliding noise on the far side of the room, followed by soft footsteps.

"Oh."

Makoto jumped, his heart and stomach flipping.

He turned his head to the doorway.

Blue.

He was met with a sea of blue.

But this blue was not just the same blue he had met a few months ago.

This was the blue that he had known his entire life.

"You're awake," Haru said from the door. "Are you… feeling okay?"

Makoto held his breath, unable to say a word. He just stared at Haru with enormous eyes and a crushing pain in his chest. A lump formed in his throat and he felt tears prick at his eyes.

Haru seemed a little confused, or maybe even worried, by his silence, not understanding the internal despair that Makoto was currently trying to overcome. His brows instead furrowed and he took a step back towards the door.

"Right. I should… go let someone know that you're up," Haru said.

He turned his back to Makoto, his hand reaching out to touch the handle of the sliding door.

Makoto inhaled sharply, suddenly overwhelmed.

He could not let Haru leave his sight.

What if he forgot him all over again?!

He could not lose those memories ever again!

He took in a choked breath and cried out with whatever energy he could muster.

"Haru-chan…!"

The door stopped sliding open, Haru frozen and suddenly rigid.

Time seemed to stop as he turned around to face Makoto, an emotion in his eyes that Makoto had never seen before.

His blue eyes were wide and *shining*.

"Wha… What did you say?" Haru whispered.

Makoto's heart broke.

He reached out his arms towards Haru, desperately hoping that his friend would remember him, too.

"Haru-chan!" Makoto rasped, a tear escaping down his cheek. "*Haru-chan!"*

Haru hesitated for only one more second.

Then, he raced across the room and threw his arms around Makoto's shoulders, pulling him close and holding the back of his head.

"Haru-chan… *Haru-chan…"* Makoto cried, his hands clawing at the back of Haru's shirt.

"Makoto…" Haru said back.

"I-I remember…" Makoto said desperately through his sobs. "I remember *everything."*

He heard Haru gasp and his arms tightened around Makoto's shoulders. He could feel Haru's fingers gently carding through his hair.

"Makoto…" he whispered reverently.

"I'm *so sorry,"* Makoto apologized, hiccupping as he tried to catch his breath. "I'm *so sorry* that I forgot about you, Haru-chan. I'm *so, so sorry!"*

Haru squeezed him tighter, pushing his head gently to his chest. Makoto could hear his heart pounding in his chest.

"It's okay, Makoto," Haru said. "Don't apologize."

The words were like a soft rain after a heavy drought. Relief flooded into Makoto's chest as he cried into Haru's chest.

"Don't cry, Makoto," Haru whispered. "I'm here."

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to check out my Tumblr for any updates or info regarding my fics. Ask me a question if you'd like!

Aaand if anyone would like to do any kind of art for this fic, feel free to do so! :D

All I need is the air I breathe

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! I'm back and I'm feeling so much better. Thank you all for the wonderful comments and get-well wishes. It really helped and I'm so, SO thankful and grateful to have such wonderful readers. You guys are truly the best and you helped me get through these past few weeks.

Huge shout-out to Tayu-chan for helping me with this chapter!!! Thank you so much for the help and the many, many encouraging talks. So many times I wanted to give up but you were there for me. Thank you so much!!!

Also, I believe that this adventure is almost coming to a close. So be on the lookout! I'm not sure how many more chapters this will be, but be prepared for an ending soon. I already don't want that to happen ;_;

Well, without further ado, here is the next chapter.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Do you need anything to drink?"

"I'm all right. Thanks, Haru."

"Mmn. But don't fall asleep. I really should go get the doctor."

"Not… not yet. Can we… can we just stay like this for a minute?"

"…Yeah."

"Thanks, Haru."

"Mmn."

The clock on the wall in the hospital room clicked when its minute hand passed the twelve, indicating that it was midnight. The darkened room was only slightly lit by the pale moonlight steaming in through the window along with the lights from the hallway just outside the door.

Haru and Makoto both rested on their sides on the hospital bed, facing each other as they spoke in hushed voices. Makoto kept his injured temple up to face the ceiling to prevent any pressure on it.

"So… you… you were in the car accident with your parents?" Haru asked cautiously.

Makoto's red and puffy eyes squinted in pain. He moved to nod his head and then winced when the bandages pulled at the stitches. Haru immediately reached out to put his palm on the side of Makoto's neck, keeping his head still.

"Don't move your head," Haru said. "I'm sure it's still tender."

Makoto gave a small, grateful smile and then he hummed. "Yeah. Thank you."

"Mmn," Haru hummed, his hand hesitantly pulling back to rest flat on the bed. He bit his lip, blue eyes focused. "So…"

Makoto blinked and then sighed, averting his eyes. "Right… I, uh… yes. I was in the car accident, too."

Haru cringed, his face scrunching up painfully and his shoulders tensing. His brows pulled together and his hand gripped the sheets on the bed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Haru asked.

"I don't know," Makoto said with a sigh. "I guess I was… scared."

"Scared?" Haru repeated. "Of what? Of me?"

Makoto looked back up at him, suddenly feeling frantic. He wanted to shake his head but the pain was too much. Instead, he leaned forward on his pillow, trying to make his face look as sincere and genuine as possible.

"No! No, of course not," Makoto said.

"Then what were you scared of?" Haru asked.

Makoto swallowed, and then lowered his gaze again to stare at the blanket balled in Haru's fist.

"I was scared that you wouldn't let me work," Makoto said.

"Ah. So you *were* scared of me," Haru said plainly.

"N-Not *you*, but your policies at work!" Makoto said, his voice rising slightly. He winced when his voice made his head ache and he shut his eyes and hissed.

Haru's hand returned and gently started to massage Makoto's scalp, his fingers rubbing tight circles through his hair. The tension in Makoto's headache faded slightly and he cracked his eyes back open. Haru's expression was understanding and calm, a hint of an amused smile on his lips.

Oh.

So Haru was teasing him.

"Sorry," Haru apologized. "I didn't mean to make you upset."

Makoto cracked a small smile and hummed. "It's all right. I'm okay."

Haru hummed but did not take his hand away from Makoto's head. Instead, he shifted his hand around his scalp, moving to massage different areas. It truly was helping to soften the ache.

"I wouldn't have fired you if you had told me, you know," Haru said, moving his hand further back.

"Why not?" Makoto asked with a puzzled expression. "I mean… shouldn't you have workers that aren't… well, a hazard?" He averted his gaze, suddenly looking ashamed. "I'm pretty sure I ruined everything in the pantry…"

Haru tugged on a lock of Makoto's hair, getting Makoto to look back up at him.

"You didn't do it on purpose," Haru said. "And besides… you're my friend."

Makoto sighed, a little fondly. "*Haru*, you can't just hire your friends!"

"Why not? It was what I did with Nagisa and Rei," Haru said without a single trace of guilt.

"That's unethical, isn't it?"

"Says who?"

"*Haru!"*

Makoto laughed a little, making Haru smile. They were quiet as Haru continued to rub little circles into Makoto's scalp, moving to the back of his head. There was a quiet inhale, and then Makoto spoke again.

"Then… did you just hire me because you knew me?"

Haru hesitated, his hand stilling on the scar on the back of Makoto's head. It felt eerily bumpy and disfigured underneath his fingertips. He focused on Makoto's face, taking in his open expression. His green eyes were shining and vulnerable.

Haru swallowed.

"Not… not exactly," Haru admitted. "I hired you because we had an open position and you looked like you needed help."

Makoto tilted his head a little. "But… you *did* recognize me?" he asked, his eyes and voice as innocent as ever. It made Haru want to laugh.

Makoto, you haven't changed at all, have you? Haru thought.

Haru paused and bit his lip, thinking about how to best answer Makoto's question. He could feel his fingers shaking in Makoto's hair and he took a slow breath through his nose to calm the tremor.

"I thought it was you when I first saw you," Haru explained. "But I didn't confirm that it was really you until I got to know you better. The things you said, your mannerisms… it all confirmed that it was really you."

Makoto inhaled sharply through his nose and paused, his green eyes getting a fraction wider.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Makoto asked.

Haru blinked at him, his lips parting. "What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you… tell me who you were?" Makoto asked. "Why didn't you… If you knew it was me, then… why didn't you tell me?"

Makoto's eyes pricked with tears and he internally chastised himself, begging for the tears to stay in his eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was to make Haru feel guilty.

But Haru's lip pulled to the side and he sighed softly, his eyes lowering to stare at a point on Makoto's chest.

"You… you didn't seem to recognize me… at all," Haru said, his voice sounding a little hurt. Makoto could feel his hand shaking on his scalp. "I… I wanted to tell you, but… you had no

recollection of our childhood. And then Yamazaki showed up and…" Haru started to pull his hand away from Makoto's head, feeling sheepish. "I figured you'd moved on and replaced me."

Makoto gasped and reached up to grab Haru's arm before he could lift his fingers from Makoto's hair.

"I didn't mean to!" Makoto rasped desperately, making Haru's eyes widen. "I can't explain it. It was like… it was like a chunk of my life had been missing and it just… it suddenly all came back. Like a missing puzzle piece."

Haru blinked at him for a moment and then tilted his head, pondering Makoto's words.

"You said you got your memories back when you woke up, right?" Haru asked.

Makoto started to nod again and then winced, *again.* He sighed, letting go of Haru's hand once he no longer felt the tug. Haru's hand came back down and rested on Makoto's hair, his fingers lazily combing through his brown locks.

"Yeah," Makoto answered.

"Then maybe…" Haru's hand traveled back down to feel the scar along the back of Makoto's head. "Do you think the car accident caused you to forget me?"

Makoto's eyes blew wide, a shiver running down his spine as Haru's finger traced the bumpy scar. Would a car accident cause something like that? Just wiping out one distinct part of someone's life?

"Oh, I…" Makoto hesitated, swallowing thickly. "I never thought of it that way, but… I guess it did."

His lips pulled down into a small frown, his eyes drooping further.

"I can't believe that I forgot so many years of my life…" Makoto mumbled, looking guilty. "I… I put you through a lot, didn't I?"

"It wasn't your fault," Haru said quickly, his voice sharp. "I know that now. So don't blame yourself."

Makoto swallowed and lowered his eyes, humming sadly. Haru continued his ministrations in his hair and head, the throb lessening. He felt a little relief, knowing Haru did not blame him. It still stung, however, to walk around with part of his memories missing for so long.

"But… you *do* remember everything, right?" Haru asked, startling Makoto out of his thoughts.

"Oh, y-yeah," Makoto stuttered, looking back up at Haru. "We… we met when we were babies, but we didn't really talk until that day in the sandbox."

Haru inhaled sharply, his eyes wide. "You… you remember that?"

A broad smile pulled on Makoto's lips, making the skin around his eyes redden and crinkle.

"I guess you've been helping me up and onto my feet since we were kids," Makoto said with a chuckle.

Haru smiled at the sound of Makoto's laugh. He huffed out a small laugh himself and rolled his eyes a little.

"Well, you do seem to fall down a lot," Haru said.

"Not on purpose!" Makoto defended, the smile still on his face.

"Ah, right. Your sandcastle just formed itself when you tripped on it."

"I was a clumsy kid!"

"*Was?"*

"Haru!"

They shared more soft laughs, their voices echoing softly in the small room. Haru moved his hand up to the top of Makoto's head to push down the stray locks of hair. He remembered that day in the sandbox very well. Makoto had face-planted in the sand, his little eyes tearing up as Haru reached down to help him up. They had been inseparable ever since.

Well, until…

Haru frowned, a stray piece of hair on Makoto's head refusing to stay down.

…until Makoto suddenly just disappeared.

"Why did your family move away?" Haru asked, looking at Makoto with curious eyes.

Makoto's smile suddenly fell from his face and his brows pinched. He took a deep breath and then sighed, looking down at the pillow and turning his face towards it.

"I… Do you remember the night of that festival? When I won that keychain for you?" Makoto asked, his eyes traveling back up to look at Haru.

"Yeah," Haru said immediately. That keychain was still dangling on the faucet of his bathtub. There was no way he could forget that night. "Of course I do."

Makoto bit his lip. "Do you remember the reason I wanted to win you a prize that night?"

Haru paused, thinking back to that night. Bright colors, red booths, little yukatas…

"W-Well… you decided not to join the swim club because of me. I feel that it's my fault."

Haru's hand tightened in Makoto's hair.

"You… you felt guilty about not wanting to swim," Haru said.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed after a moment's pause. "I wanted to win you a prize for making you give that up."

Haru's face hardened, his heart doing a strange flip inside his chest.

"You…" Haru started, his mind reeling and processing that night. "You didn't make me quit. You… you were…"

"D-During that storm… the fisherman's boat sank. He… everyone died and…"

"You were scared," Haru said, trying to get Makoto to look at him. "You were scared of swimming."

"Yeah…" Makoto said softly, curling in on himself.

"And it was because of that storm, right?" Haru asked. "And—"

"They had a seaside funeral for everyone who died that day. I… I went to your house to see if you wanted to come but… you weren't home."

Haru's breath hitched.

He leaned his head down to peer at Makoto's face. His green eyes were shimmering but no tears threatened to fall just yet. He looked small, his face trying to hide against the pillow and his eyes straining to look at anything but Haru.

"You… you went to that funeral," Haru said quietly.

Makoto closed his eyes and sighed against the pillow. Haru gently gripped onto Makoto's hair, begging for Makoto to open his eyes.

"Yeah," Makoto answered, his voice muffled.

"All alone?" Haru asked, fearing the answer.

"Ah, well. My mom took me but I went out on the pier by myself," Makoto said with a wet, strained laugh. "I, uh… I think I had a panic attack and my mom had to get me. I can't really remember how I got home."

"Makoto…" Haru winced, his breath catching again.

"A-Anyway…" Makoto said with a soft sniffle, trying to move on from the subject. "I was really scared of the ocean since then. We could see the ocean from our house every single day."

Haru started to connect the dots, realizing where Makoto was going with his story. He shifted a little closer to his friend, holding his head comfortingly.

"I started to have panic attacks a lot. Every day, when I would leave the house to go see you, I would panic and run back inside and cry for hours," Makoto said.

"Makoto…" Haru whispered, feeling his heart breaking at the sound of Makoto's fragile voice.

"I stopped going outside, and I just refused to go to school. So, my… p-parents decided to look for a new house, further inland," Makoto said. "And then, soon after the twins were born, we moved. I… I never got to tell you or say goodbye."

Makoto paused and took a shuddering breath, still avoiding Haru's eyes.

"I still regret that."

"We were just kids, Makoto," Haru said, his heart squeezing. "It wasn't your fault that we lost touch."

Makoto sighed, averting his eyes. "I'm still sorry."

"Don't apologize," Haru responded immediately, making Makoto look back at him. "You have nothing to apologize for."

Makoto took in a quick, surprised breath, his eyes blowing wide. Then, he released all of the

tension all in one heavy sigh. He closed his eyes for a moment until a smile tugged on his lips and he moved his head back slowly to meet Haru's eyes.

"Mmn. Okay, Haru-chan," Makoto said, his watery green eyes crinkling with a smile.

Haru smiled back and hummed. He took his hand back from Makoto's head and looked at him seriously, eyeing him for any signs of pain.

"How's your head?" he asked.

"It feels a lot better," Makoto said.

"Mmn. Good."

Haru tucked his hand close to his chest and sighed, snuggling his face to the pillow. His stomach and chest were full of butterflies. Who knew that a bump on the head would undo everything Makoto had lost?

"Do you think things would've been different if I went with you to that funeral that day?" Haru asked, turning up his gaze to look at Makoto.

Makoto blinked and hummed, his eyes turning thoughtful. His shoulders rose and fell slightly in a small shrug, his gown softly scraping against the white sheets.

"Maybe," Makoto said with a smile. "Maybe we could've joined the swim club together."

"Too much effort," Haru said, his brows pinching in small pout.

Makoto's chuckle came from his chest, warm and bouncy.

"Yeah, it might've been a little work," Makoto said. "But you probably could've taught me not to be afraid of the water. I was… I *am*… really a coward."

Haru paused, turning the thought over and over in his mind. He could feel his entire body tense up.

The scarf.

The river.

The hospital.

Haru turned his head up look at Makoto with parted lips and shimmering eyes.

"It didn't stop you from jumping into the river to save me that day," Haru said.

Makoto's eyes widened, a flicker of fear swirling in his green orbs.

"You… you remember that?" Makoto asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Haru nodded once, determined. "I don't remember the incident, but Aki told me everything that happened."

"Aki…" Makoto said under his breath.

"Yeah. She told me how you just jumped right in the river without thinking twice," Haru said. "She said you stayed with me even in the ambulance ride over. And Mom told me that you didn't leave

my side, even when I was asleep."

"B-But—"

"You saved me that day."

Makoto inhaled sharply, his breath hitching painfully in his chest. He opened and shut his mouth a few times, unsure of what to say. He had never thought for one minute that he had saved Haru that day. Even when he had pulled Haru out of the river, his lungs barely worked and he was cold as ice. Makoto thought he had killed him.

"You saved me, Makoto," Haru continued, dragging Makoto back from the depths of his mind. "You jumped in even though you were terrified. So don't ever call yourself a coward. If anything, you were incredibly brave. You still are."

"Haru, you…" A lump suddenly formed in Makoto's throat, making his voice die on his tongue.

"I never got to properly thank you back then for pulling me out of the river and being with me until I got better," Haru said, lowering his watery gaze down. "I never got the chance to."

Haru shifted closer to Makoto, leaning forward until their foreheads touched. He reached up to card his fingers through Makoto's hair and then he latched on gently, clinging onto Makoto's head with trembling fingers.

"Thank you, Makoto," Haru said, his voice choking up. "For saving my life."

Makoto whimpered, tears pricking his eyes and his throat closing. He leaned against Haru's forehead and released a squeaky hum from the top of his throat. He reached up to grip onto Haru's wrist and he gave a short nod.

"Mmn!"

Once they had both calmed, Haru begrudgingly forced himself out of the hospital bed and slipped out of the room. He headed straight for a nurse at the desk to tell her about Makoto and she scrambled to page their doctor.

Within minutes, the same doctor as before rushed down the hallway and smiled at Haru as they entered Makoto's room. They slipped back into the room, the doctor smiling fondly at the passed-out twins on the chairs in the corner, and then he focused back on Makoto.

"Well, good evening, Tachibana-san," the doctor said in a hushed voice.

Makoto had moved onto his back while Haru had gone, his eyes droopy and hair splayed out on the pillow. Haru swallowed, fearing that Makoto might have done damage to his wound in his shifting. But Makoto gave the doctor and Haru a sluggish wave and tiny smile, and Haru sighed in relief. Makoto still looked exhausted but he was awake and moving.

Both the doctor and Haru moved quietly next to Makoto's bedside, the doctor taking out his stethoscope and placing them into his ears.

"How's your head?" the doctor asked, pushing down the white sheets and moving Makoto's gown to the side.

"It's okay," Makoto said. He winced when the doctor put the cold stethoscope to his chest but

quickly recovered, trying for a small smile. "There's a slight ache."

"That's normal," the doctor said. "You did get a slight concussion, so it's not surprising. Any dizziness? Nausea?"

"Not really, actually," Makoto said.

Haru snapped his head down at him, staring with reproachful eyes. Makoto offered him a reassuring smile, his eyes crinkling.

I'm telling the truth, Makoto's eyes told him.

Haru paused for a moment and studied over him, looking for any signs of distress. Makoto bit back a laugh at his seriousness but kept it together for Haru's sake. After another moment of careful observation, Haru pushed his lips forward in a small pout and averted his eyes.

Fine, Haru's eyes said back to him.

Makoto smiled wider at Haru, amused, and then glanced back at the doctor.

"I just feel tired," Makoto added.

"Yes, that's very normal," the doctor responded with a chuckle.

The doctor removed the stethoscope from Makoto's chest and moved to peer underneath the bandages on his temple. Makoto winced when the doctor pulled the bandages away from the stitches, eliciting a soft whine from his throat.

"Sorry, but I need to make sure your wound hasn't gotten any infection or anything," the doctor said to him sympathetically. He inspected the wound carefully and gingerly before letting it rest back against Makoto's temple. "Looks good. No swelling."

The doctor took a step back and smiled at him.

"All right, everything checks out," he said. "I'll get your papers ready and get you set to leave."

"Oh? Really?" Makoto asked, moving to sit up. Haru's hand immediately jumped out to support his back, helping him to shift back against the pillows.

"Yep! Since you're awake and responsive, and there are no other issues, you're free to go," the doctor said. "You got pretty lucky. Having so many head traumas in such a short period of time could be really dangerous."

Makoto could feel Haru's sharp eyes on him and he chuckled nervously, his finger absently scratching his cheek.

"But fortunately, this concussion was mild," the doctor added.

"Even though he passed out?" Haru asked.

The doctor nodded, giving a light smile. "It wasn't severe. So as long as he's up and can walk and have coherent conversation, then he's fine enough to go home."

Haru sighed in relief and Makoto nodded, humming thoughtfully.

"That's great," Makoto said with a soft sigh. He sat up straighter on the bed and reached back to rub

the back of his head gently, his fingers brushing over the white bandages. "I have somewhere to be later today, so…"

Haru suddenly turned his head sharply to look at him, his brows rising quizzically. Makoto smiled at him and waved his hand in the air, signaling *Later.*

"That should be fine, but you should take time to rest before you go anywhere," the doctor said. "Once you get home, just get some sleep."

Makoto gave a small nod and smiled.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to get some rest," Makoto said.

"Good," the doctor nodded as he tucked Makoto's chart under his arm. "Well, I'll go get your papers ready and a nurse will be back to sign you out."

Then, the doctor slipped out of the room, sliding the door shut with a soft click. Luckily, the sound did not disturb the twins that were still slumbering in the corner of the room.

Once the doctor was gone, Haru turned to look at Makoto with a raised brow.

"You're going somewhere today?" Haru asked.

Makoto smiled sheepishly.

"I'm planning on going to put in the deposit for a new apartment today," Makoto explained. "Well, that was the plan anyway. I was going to go after work later to pay for it."

Haru's brows rose to his forehead. "You got enough money to pay for a new apartment?"

Makoto rubbed the back of his neck a little timidly, his eyes falling to gaze into his lap.

"Well, I should have enough after yesterday's shift," Makoto said. "As long as my paycheck went through to my bank, I should have enough for the deposit."

Haru paused, taking in his awkward expression. Then, he smiled fondly.

"Paychecks usually go out on Wednesdays, so it should have gone through to your bank account by now," Haru assured.

Makoto's sheepish smile grew wide and giddy, relief flooding in his chest. He sighed softly, putting a hand to his chest.

"Thank goodness," Makoto said. "I needed to at least get the paperwork signed for the apartment before Sato-san comes tomorrow."

"Oh, that's right. The inspection is tomorrow," Haru said thoughtfully. "Are you going to be okay? Should I come, too?"

Makoto hummed, touched.

"I think it'll be fine," Makoto assured. "The biggest thing she required was that I get a larger apartment. And since I have enough money now to pay for it, she should be okay with it. It'll be fine."

Haru hesitated, studying Makoto's face for any trace of doubt or uncertainty. But after a moment of

deliberation, the wrinkle in between his brows smoothed and his lips even curved into a small smile.

"All right. As long as you're sure," Haru said, to which Makoto nodded in response.

They waited in a calm silence until Haru glanced at the clock on the wall and then back at the door where the doctor had disappeared earlier.

"I wonder how long they'll be…" Haru mumbled.

"If you want to go get something to eat or drink, I'll wait for the nurse here," Makoto said.

Haru turned to look back at Makoto, his face turning contemplative as he considered his offer. His eyes darted back and forth from the door and to the twins.

"Are you sure?" Haru asked, his voice small.

Makoto smiled and nodded. "I'll be fine." He nodded towards the twins. "They probably won't be awake for a while."

Haru paused and considered further, his fingers fidgeting by his sides. He took a slow breath and then nodded slowly, almost to himself.

"Okay. I'm going to get some coffee. Do you want anything?" Haru asked.

"No, but thank you," Makoto said while he shook his head softly.

Haru paused at the door one last time before sliding it open and then disappearing behind it.

Makoto slumped back against the pillows and sighed, closing his eyes. Although he had lost consciousness for hours, the emotional warfare his body had been dragged through had finally taken its toll. He was exhausted and definitely ready to sleep in his own apartment.

He smiled softly at the thought of paying the deposit later that day. A new, bigger apartment that the twins can spread out and have separate rooms. A bigger living room and kitchen that he could be proud of instead of being ashamed. Haru could even come over more often! He could help Ren with his art or teach him new recipes to cook.

It could be the start of a whole new and better life for them.

Suddenly, Makoto could hear the door slide open again.

That was quick, Makoto thought, thinking Haru had already returned with coffee.

"Um, Tachibana-san?"

Makoto's eyes snapped open and he looked towards the door as a nurse entered the room, a concerned crease in between her brows. She had a clipboard in her hands.

"Yes, that's me," Makoto said, pulling himself up to sit against the pillows.

"Ah, okay. Well, I was doing everything we needed to get you checked out, but there was an issue with your insurance…" the nurse's voice trailed off as she approached.

Makoto's heart skipped a beat and he glanced down at the clipboard in her hands. He skimmed over it, trying to make heads or tails of anything written on the papers, but he could not decipher all

of the numbers.

"W-What was the problem?" Makoto asked, his brows furrowing.

"Oh, well… it seems that your policy changed recently. Um, it says that you were a dependent on your parents' plan before, but you recently changed to have your own plan," the nurse said.

Makoto gulped and winced, remembering the tiring process of finding a new, affordable insurance for both him and the twins. Sousuke had stayed up with him for days after the funeral trying to find all of this information. It was grueling and annoying, something that Makoto never wanted to do ever again.

"Okay," Makoto said, trying to process the nurse's words. "So… what's the problem?"

"Well, your policy only covers a few things, like regular doctor visits or simple procedures," the nurse said. "It doesn't cover things like x-rays and scans…"

Makoto's heart rose to his throat, making it hard to breathe. His stomach was fluttering nervously.

"So… what do I owe?" Makoto asked.

The nurse pointed to the price at the bottom of the page.

Makoto inhaled sharply, his chest tightening as he heart plummeted into his stomach like a lead weight.

The cost was double the amount of the deposit he had planned to pay for the new apartment later that day.

"Um…" Makoto's voice shook as he tried to speak. "When… when is this payment due?"

Maybe the payment would not be due for a while.

Maybe he would have enough time to save up for it.

Maybe it would be all right.

Maybe it—

"The end of the month."

Makoto's heart felt as if it would explode.

All of those long, tiring months of saving, sacrificing his health for the sake of the twins, and working himself to death, were now all for nothing. Life had snuck up on him and sucker-punched him in the stomach, leaving him breathless.

Before his very eyes, his entire plan had shattered in an instant.

"We can set you up on the minimum payments, if you'd like," the nurse said.

Makoto could barely hear her explanation about the payments.

Everything had turned to mush.

Maybe he should have never woken up.

"…so, can you sign here?"

Makoto snapped his head up, the air pushing out of his swollen lungs. The nurse standing above him appeared fuzzy at first, but quickly cleared when he took in a few unsteady breaths. She was holding out the clipboard and a pen for him, pointing to a line at the bottom of the page.

He blinked at the paper and then took the clipboard from her with weak fingers. He carefully grasped the pen and shakily placed its tip to the paper, slowly dragging out the lines to create the characters for his name.

"All right. Well, you're good to go now, Tachibana-san," the nurse said. "Please give us a call if you have any other questions."

"Yeah…" Makoto mumbled, barely comprehending her words as he handed the clipboard back to her.

The nurse gave a polite bow before exiting the room, leaving Makoto alone and speechless. His body felt heavy and numb, his mind running a blank as the weight of the situation fully hit him.

Wait… wait, wait, wait. Makoto's mind started whirling the information around and scattering them in a panicked frenzy.

If I pay the deposit for the apartment, then… then I won't have enough to pay the hospital bill…

What will happen then?

The inspection is tomorrow!

What…

What am I going to do?

"Sorry that took me so long. The line was… Makoto?"

Makoto turned his head and saw Haru standing by the door, his bag in his hand and a worried expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" Haru asked.

Makoto frowned, tears instantly springing to his eyes. His hands gripped the blanket hard, his knuckles turning white.

"H-Haru…" he whimpered. "I… I don't know what to do."

The four of them trudged back to Makoto's apartment. The twins latched onto Makoto's hands as they ascended the stairs, both of them desperately fighting off sleep. Haru was behind them, watching each step that Makoto took to make sure he did not stumble.

Makoto released Ran's hand to pull his keys from his pocket, his shaking fingers nearly dropping them as he slid it into the lock. He had been sullen the entire walk and Haru felt his chest cave with worry. Makoto had explained what the nurse told him about the insurance and the bill. He tried to hold back tears throughout his entire explanation, desperate to keep it all in, but some had managed to slip out.

It broke Haru's heart.

So, on their dreary walk back to the apartment, Haru had been contemplating and formulating several different plans. Since the inspection was the following evening, they had to act fast.

But, Haru could only come up with one idea, and he was not sure that it would even work. It was a last-minute decision and, not to mention, very risky. Playing games with social services is not the wisest plan, and Haru was afraid that Sato would think Makoto was not serious.

But Haru wanted to try.

They all entered the apartment and shuffled out of their shoes on the genkan, the twins yawning every few minutes.

"Okay, guys. You still have school in a few hours, so go get some rest," Makoto said, pushing the twins towards the hallway.

Luckily, the twins easily trudged down the hallway without a fight, making Makoto sigh in relief. He slumped down on the couch and hunched over on his knees, his head falling into his hands.

"This is… this is bad," Makoto said in a low voice.

Haru winced at how raspy his voice sounded and he moved to plop down next to him, his arms resting on his thighs.

"I… I don't know if I could come up with the money," Makoto continued. He ran his hand down his face. "I mean… I guess I could try to find another job to work this month."

Haru's brows pinched. A *third* job? That was too much.

"Maybe… maybe I could ask Sato-san for an extension. Just… one more month. That… could be enough for another deposit, right?" Makoto mumbled, pondering over it. "Or… ugh. Why did I have to faint? This is all my fault. I shouldn't have worked when I was feeling so dizzy, I should have—"

"Hey," Haru said, reaching over to grab Makoto's shoulder. "Calm down. Panicking won't solve anything. Let's think this through calmly."

Makoto leaned up from his hands to stare at Haru, his eyes shining in the dim light from the lamp. He nodded glumly and then sighed, letting his shoulders sag and relax.

"Good. Now, I thought of an idea that might work," Haru said, releasing Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto sat up straight and turned to fully face Haru. His green eyes danced and sparkled with hope. Haru stared back at him with calmness, trying to keep Makoto from spiraling into panic and agitating his concussion further.

"What if you and the twins moved in with me?" Haru asked.

Makoto's eyes widened and his breath hitched, his shoulders visibly jumping. His jaw dropped and he blinked rapidly.

"You mean… to your apartment?" Makoto asked.

Haru nodded once, firm and sure, and Makoto paused, biting his lip. He swallowed and pondered it, his head tilting to the side.

"That… that sounds like it would be a good idea," Makoto said quietly, looking downward.

"But…"

Haru waited, his brows pinching when Makoto did not continue. He leaned forward to catch his eyes and he gently tried to coax more words out of him.

"But?" Haru prompted.

Makoto's lips twisted and his hands found each other in his lap, his thumbs dancing nervously.

"I'm not sure if Sato-san will allow it," he finally explained.

Haru's brow rose. "Why not?"

Makoto bit his lip again and reached his hand back to rub his neck. It was a nervous habit that Haru had picked up on since they reunited several months ago.

"Well, they're very careful about who interacts with the twins. If I were to live with you, they'd probably have to do a background check on you," Makoto said, his face pulling into a wince.

Haru shook his head. "That's fine. I don't mind."

Makoto's teeth were gnawing on his lip now and Haru worried that he would make it bleed.

"I… I can ask her if that's okay. She might allow it, but… she also might not," Makoto said sadly.

Haru hummed in acknowledgement, nodding to himself. He knew that it was one of their only options left and Makoto had to give it a try.

"It could be risky, though and…. Are… are you sure it's fine?" Makoto asked, looking back at Haru with a pitiful look on his face. "I mean… I feel like I'm taking advantage of your kindness."

Haru grabbed his shoulder again, more tightly this time, and forced Makoto to look at him.

"I'm the one offering, so it's not taking advantage," Haru said. He squeezed his shoulder tighter. "We're friends, Makoto. I want to help in any way that I can. Got it?"

"Haru…" Makoto whispered, his eyes welling up with more tears.

He sniffed and then nodded, emitting a soft whine from his throat. Haru moved his hand up to Makoto's neck and gently pulled his head down to rest on his shoulder.

"Just talk with her tomorrow, okay? She might agree to the idea," Haru said gently.

Makoto shuddered and Haru rubbed his back to warm him up.

"And… and what if… what if she says no?" Makoto asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Haru's hand froze on Makoto's back, his palm flat on his shoulder blade. He bit his lip and paused, his gut sinking. He did not even want to think about what would happen if she were against the idea.

What would that mean for Makoto? For the twins? He just got injured, for crying out loud! The stress that this was causing was too much for him.

As his silence stretched on, Makoto's shoulder began to tremble as he choked back sobs. Haru held him closer and leaned his cheek on the top of Makoto's head.

"Don't think like that," Haru said. "Let's just worry about that tomorrow, okay?"

Makoto took a slow, shuddering breath that made his entire body tremble on his exhale. He sniffled a little and then nodded.

"Okay," Makoto agreed.

Haru sighed in relief, thankful that he could calm just a little of Makoto's stress for the night.

"It's late and you need rest. Do you want me to stay here?" Haru asked, his hand moving in slow circles in between Makoto's shoulder blades.

"No. I think I'll be all right," Makoto said. He leaned up from Haru's shoulder and wiped his eyes, looking at Haru with a shaky smile. "Go home and rest. I know the restaurant needs you later today."

Haru pouted a little, his shoulders slumping. He knew Makoto was right and that he should leave, but his mind was racing to find reasons to stay.

"All right," Haru relented, standing to his feet. "But the minute you feel any pain, you call me, okay? I don't care what time it is."

Makoto's smile grew a little more solid and he nodded. "I will. I promise."

"Good. And don't show up for work. Just rest. Oh, uh… do you need me to come by at all?" Haru asked.

"I… I think I'll be fine," Makoto said, scratching his cheek. "Thank you, though."

Haru nodded once. "Okay. Well, get some rest. I'll call you when I'm on break to check in."

Haru reluctantly headed to the genkan and started slipping on his shoes. Once they had fit snugly on his feet, he turned back to the couch and nodded in goodbye. His hand turned the doorknob and he pushed it open.

"Oh, Haru-chan!" Makoto called from the couch.

Haru stopped and turned back to look at Makoto, who was halfway off of the couch, his arm extended towards the door as if to pull Haru back in.

"Hm?" Haru hummed curiously.

Makoto opened and shut his mouth once, twice, and then he took a deep breath.

"If… if I lose my memories again… can you please tell me everything?" Makoto asked, his green eyes begging. "I… I don't want to forget it again, so… please. Please, can you tell me?"

Haru's chest felt tight at seeing Makoto's sincere and worried eyes boring into his soul. He looked so completely pitiful with that bandage wrapped around his head and his rosy cheeks and tear-filled eyes. Makoto was still the same as when he was a child. It made Haru smile.

Makoto, you really haven't changed at all, have you?

"Of course, Makoto," Haru said. "I promise."

Makoto's face lit up for the first time since they arrived at the apartment and he smiled brightly. It

reminded Haru of that silly snowman Makoto had made all those years ago.

That bright smile…

You really haven't changed.

The morning flew by quickly, especially with Haru working Makoto's shifts. As soon as he entered the restaurant, he was bombarded with question after question from his employees about the incident in the pantry. Haru tried to answer as best as he could without soiling Makoto's reputation.

Nagisa and Rei were the ones that were the most concerned, however, and they asked about Makoto's wellbeing rather than snooping for juicy gossip to spread amongst themselves.

"He's resting at home for today," Haru had told them. "And I'm planning on making him rest tomorrow, too."

Tomorrow…

Haru felt his insides squirm. The word *tomorrow* made him feel sick to his stomach. The social worker would come to inspect Makoto's progress, or lack thereof. Haru worried about their plan, wondering if she would accept the terms or even allow an extension.

He had been texting Makoto throughout the day, sending him other ideas.

To: Makoto

What if you just moved into my apartment and I just leave for the day? You can just say my apartment is yours.

The idea was perfect. Just let Makoto use his own apartment and say that it was his, the new and upgraded apartment.

But, of course, Makoto had a thick conscious.

From: Makoto

I don't think it would be a good idea to lie to Sato-san… I feel that it could lead to more trouble.

Really, Haru should have seen it coming. He knew Makoto would not go along with that suggestion. Makoto was right, though. Lying to a social worker is probably the best way to get the twins taken.

Maybe there's another way?

To: Makoto

I could pretend to be your cousin or something, and I'll offer you to stay with me. We practically grew up together anyway.

That could work. The social worker would more likely allow it if family was involved.

From: Makoto

That's lying again… And they'd still have to do a background check on you. They would find out you're not family then.

Darn.

It was a lame suggestion anyway. He knew that it was far-fetched with too many holes and gaps.

Haru sighed, almost ready to just pocket his phone completely. His ideas were running thin and his nerves started to grow as the day progressed, each hour going by at lightning speed. At this rate, the inspection would come in no time at all.

He was running out of time to come up with ideas to give to Makoto.

Near the end of his shift, Haru's phone buzzed one last time.

From: Makoto

Thank you for worrying about me, but I think I'll just stick with the first idea. Maybe Sato-san will be nice and actually like the idea of us moving in with you.

Haru took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed. He nodded to himself and then clicked a few keys on his phone.

To: Makoto

As long as you're sure. Get some more rest. And by the way, you guys are always welcome to my place.

Haru hit send and then slid his phone into his pocket. He leaned against the cleaned counter in the kitchen, taking deep breaths.

He needed a rooftop.

Another buzz in his pocket and Haru was pulling out his phone to check his messages.

From: Makoto

Thank you, Haru-chan.

"All right, are the dishes put away?"

"Yes, Onii-chan!"

"And what about the laundry hanging outside? You brought it in, right? They're calling for rain soon."

"We brought it all of it, I think."

"You *think* or you *know?"*

"Onii-chan, it's clean! Don't freak out!"

"I-I'm not! I just wanted to make sure the apartment was clean!"

"Yeah, sure…"

Makoto huffed as he folded up his blanket from the couch and draped it neatly over the back. He turned around and placed his hands on his hips, peering around the living room. It was pristine and spotless, the floors cleaned and no dust in sight. Even the air smelled clean.

Makoto took a deep breath.

This was it.

Their time was up.

Sato would arrive within the hour.

Makoto took a deep breath and faced the twins, placing his hands on his hips.

"Okay, go make sure your rooms are in order. I'm going to check the bathroom," Makoto said.

Ran and Ren both nodded and scampered down the hall to their shared bedroom while Makoto walked to the bathroom. He slid open the door and stepped inside, immediately noticing the mirror on the wall.

He cringed.

The bandage was still wrapped around his head from the day before, pressing firmly against the wound on his temple. It still ached here and there, especially when he moved too quickly.

Makoto ran his fingers along the edge of the bandage and sighed. He remembered receiving the endless texts from Haru all day about making sure he got enough rest and if he needed to skip work to come over.

Makoto took a shuddering breath.

It will be fine. He could do this.

He just has to convince Sato that Haru is a good person and that his intentions are pure. Haru was definitely someone that he could trust.

But… the deadline was today.

What if it was too late?

Makoto sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Okay," he mumbled to himself. "Just have to keep it under control. I still have time. I just need to cool my head and—"

Knock, knock, knock.

Suddenly, three loud knocks from the front door caused Makoto to flinch, his thoughts ripped from his mind.

What? Makoto thought, his heart kicking into overdrive.

Is that Sato-san?

Why is she early?

"Onii-chan! There's someone at the door!" Ran called from the hallway.

"Ah, right!" Makoto stuttered, his eyes finally scanning the bathroom for any signs of a mess. "Coming!"

He stumbled out of the bathroom, nearly tripping over his own feet, and he headed to the living room. His hand shook as he reached for the doorknob, causing it to rattle once he grasped it.

Get ahold of yourself, Makoto thought, chastising himself. *Just breathe. All you have to do is ask. That's all.*

She could be completely on board with the idea.

Makoto opened the door and offered—what he hoped to be—a strong smile. But it fell soon after.

Sato was standing in the hallway with two men standing behind her, both of them dressed in suits. They all had solemn looks on their faces.

Or… she could totally hate the idea.

"Good evening, Tachibana-san," Sato greeted as she adjusted her glasses over her nose.

"Oh, uh, good evening, Sato-san," Makoto greeted. He stepped back and held open the door wider. "Please, come in."

Sato walked onto the genkan and replaced her heels with slippers that Makoto had provided. The two men behind her followed her inside but neither of them even bothered to remove their shoes.

"These two are from the agency. They are my assistants this evening," Sato told him as she gestured towards the two men.

"O-Oh, uh, nice to meet you," Makoto said, slightly bowing his head to them.

The men did not react.

Makoto felt his stomach clench.

Sato walked into the living room and sat down on the couch, leaving the two men to stand by the front door quietly. Makoto hurriedly followed her and hesitated, shifting his weight back and forth on his feet.

"Would you like any tea?" Makoto asked.

Sato peered around the living room carefully before shaking her head in response.

"No, thank you," Sato said. "Now, please sit. We have a lot to discuss."

Makoto gulped.

She only refused tea, he thought. *Don't panic. It doesn't mean anything.*

After a quick breath to reset his bearings, Makoto sat down on a chair that was across from the couch.

"So, the past two months of this extension have been quite busy for you," Sato said as she pulled out a file from her shoulder bag.

"Y-Yes, it… it was," Makoto said glumly.

"You lost your job, your siblings got into a fight and were suspended, you forgot to pay for your bills… and now, I've recently been notified of you being hospitalized."

Makoto's hands turned into fists on his lap, his nails digging tiny crescents into his palms.

"Yes, but only for a few hours," Makoto answered.

"Why were you hospitalized?" Sato asked, her brows pinched in concern. "I was only given some minor details, but I see you have a bandage on your head."

Makoto paused, swallowing thickly, as his hand reached up to touch the bandage gently.

"Well, I was having these really terrible headaches and it just got worse until… until I fainted at work," Makoto said.

"You fainted at work?" Sato asked, her brow quirking.

Makoto could feel heat on his cheeks and ears.

"Yes. And I hit my head on a shelf. I got a concussion," Makoto explained.

I might as well tell her the whole truth, Makoto said, his shoulders tensing.

"I see," Sato said, her tone turning sharp.

Makoto winced at her voice and squirmed in his seat, hunching in on himself. He glanced over to the men at the door, seeing that they were both still standing as statues with their arms behind their backs.

Something felt off.

The air suddenly felt twice as heavy as before.

And Makoto could hear his heart in his ears.

"So you worked even though you knew you were unwell?" Sato asked.

Makoto snapped his head back to her and sat up straight.

"Um, well… I suppose I did," Makoto said.

Sato's face pulled into a grimace. "That's a little careless, isn't it?"

Makoto gaped at her.

What was going on with her tonight? She seemed like a different person than usual.

"I… I guess it was a little careless," Makoto said, rubbing his neck.

"Hm," Sato hummed as she flipped through the file. It was silent for a moment as she studied the file's contents, and when she finally closed it, she gazed at Makoto with a concerned expression. "So, onto the most important question of the evening."

Makoto took a deep breath and held it.

"Did you find a larger apartment?"

Makoto closed his eyes and a shiver ran down his spine.

Please let this work. Please.

He released his breath through his nose and opened his eyes to look at Sato.

"I didn't," Makoto said, making Sato's eyes widen a fraction. "Because of the sudden hospital visit, I didn't have enough money to pay for the deposit."

Silence hung in the air for a second before Makoto realized that he had to pitch his idea. He could feel sweat rolling down his neck at the strain.

"Um, but I was given an offer!" Makoto said, leaning over on his knees in a desperate attempt to keep Sato's attention. "My boss, uh, Nanase Haruka, has offered us to live with him. He has a three-bedroom apartment and it's in the nicer part of town."

Sato's brows furrowed. "Your boss?"

Makoto nodded. "Yes, from the restaurant. You see, he's actually a childhood friend and—"

"Tachibana-san."

Sato's voice was cutting and sharp, slicing through his sentence and making him snap his jaw shut.

"There are several steps we have to go through for something like that to work," Sato said. "He would need extensive background checks and interviews and home inspections. The process could take weeks to go through."

Makoto's eyes widened.

Weeks?

"Not only that, but you offering this to me sounds like you are incapable of taking care of the twins on your own."

Makoto gasped, his heart diving into his stomach. He shook his head frantically and stood to his feet. Panic was beginning to take over.

"No, no, no. It isn't like that at all!" Makoto said, his voice breathy. "I… I can take care of them. I just… I need more time to save up the money again for the apartment. Can you… would it be possible to give me another extension?"

Sato's face fell, her eyes squinting in a wince behind her glasses. She sighed and looked up at Makoto pitifully. She looked just as tired as Makoto felt.

"I've already given you one extension," Sato said. "And the deadline is today."

It felt as if there was a hole in Makoto's chest.

Was this reality?

What did this mean now?

Why was it so hard to breathe?

He should protect the twins.

He needed to go talk to them and hold them and—

"Onii-chan?

Makoto gasped and glanced up at the hallway. The twins stood quietly with their faces twisted in concern. Ren held onto Ran's sleeve as he cowered behind her.

"What's going on?" Ran asked, her voice trembling a little.

Makoto tried to smile at her but he knew it probably looked fragile and ready to crack.

"D-Don't worry," Makoto said. "We're just talking and—"

"Tachibana-san."

Makoto startled at Sato's voice. He watched Sato rose from the couch and placed the file in her bag. She glanced back at him with cold eyes and an unreadable face.

"Because you missed the deadline for the apartment, and because of your worrisome health conditions, I deem you unfit to be the twins' proper caretaker," Sato announced.

Makoto's breath hitched as his green eyes blew wide.

"Wh… What?" Makoto whispered.

"Your siblings must come with me immediately," Sato said. She turned to the men at the front door. "Take them to the car outside."

"Yes, ma'am."

Makoto watched in frozen horror as the men walked into his apartment, shoes still on their feet, and grabbed Ran and Ren from the edge of the hallway by their shoulders.

"What are you doing?!" Ran shrieked as she struggled in the man's grasp. "Get off of me!"

"Onii-chan!" Ren cried, immediately bursting into tears. "Don't take me from Onii-chan!"

"Onii-chan!" Ran cried out again.

They both began to struggle against the men, and Makoto took a step forward to try and stop them. But Sato put up her hand, making him stop in his tracks.

"Wait," Makoto said. He glanced down at Sato, his eyes begging. "Please don't do this."

"*Onii-chan!"*

Makoto glanced up and watched as Ran and Ren both ripped their hands from the men's grasps. They sprinted over to Makoto's side and hugged his waist, their hands gripping onto his shirt.

"Don't let them take us, Onii-chan!" Ran begged, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"I'm scared!" Ren wailed, tears also running down his face. "I don't want to go! Onii-chan, I'm scared!"

Makoto pushed their heads into his stomach and held them tight.

"I... I'm sorry," Makoto sputtered, his adrenaline kicking in as he held them close. He was unsure of what else to say. Everything was spiraling out of control so quickly that he could not get his bearings straight.

"Come on, you two," one of the men said.

They each grabbed one of the twins and yanked them away from Makoto's arms, and he suddenly felt ice cold as their hands slipped from his waist.

"No! No, no, *no!"* Ran shrieked. "Let me *go!* Onii-chan!"

"O-O-Onii-chan!" Ren was full-on sobbing at this point, his chest breaking into uncontrollable hiccups.

Makoto reached out his hand to them, stunned, and watched as they struggled and cried all the way to the apartment door. They were dragged through the doorway, each of them crying one last "*Onii-chan!"* before disappearing into the hall. Their voices bounced down the hallway and then dwindled as they got out of range.

And in an instant…

…the twins were gone.

Makoto stood motionless in panic, his legs locked and unable to move.

The apartment had gone completely quiet.

Did… did he just fail?

Was he a failure as a caretaker?

Did he just… lose them?

The room was spinning lightly.

His head ached.

"Tachibana-san."

Makoto's breath stuttered.

He slowly turned his head back towards the voice in front of him. Sato's blurry form cleared and he saw a paper in her hands.

"Your siblings will be placed in foster care for now. Here is the information regarding this," Sato explained. She slipped the paper into his hands but he could barely grasp it. "You can call if you have any questions. I'll be sending you more information regarding what happens next tomorrow morning."

Sato turned to the doorway and slipped her shoes on her feet, leaving Makoto stock still in the same spot by the coffee table. He could barely see her turn her head to look at him one last time.

"I'm sorry about this, Tachibana-san. Truly, I am," she said.

Then, Sato slipped through the doorway of his apartment, the door shutting with a soft click.

The silence in the apartment was now incredibly loud. It pressed against Makoto's eardrums and made his head feel tight.

He remained frozen in place, his eyes staring down at the paper in his hands. The words started to

blur as his eyes filled with tears.

I failed, Makoto thought. *I couldn't convince her and the twins are…*

Tears started to fall from his eyes and onto the paper, dotting the white page with wet spots.

This can't be happening.

First, my parents.

Then, my memories.

And now, the twins are going to be taken from me, too?!

He clenched his fists, wrinkling the paper.

No, I can't let this happen.

I won't *let this happen.*

Makoto inhaled sharply.

Don't take them away from me, too!

Makoto dropped the paper from his hand and rushed out of his apartment, not even bothering to put on shoes. The door slammed shut behind him and he sprinted to the stairwell, almost tumbling down a flight of stairs. He finally made it to the first floor and he rushed to the front lobby. He could vaguely spot Sato stepping through the front door.

"Wait!" Makoto called as he sprinted forward.

He ran down the hallway at lightning speed and burst through the front doors of the apartment complex. Rain was pouring down outside and the cold immediately nipped at Makoto's skin.

But he spotted Sato just down the steps. She was about to get into a black car that had parked just off of the street.

"Wait!" Makoto yelled, running forward.

When Makoto's bare foot hit the rain-slicked steps, he slipped and fell forward, rolling down the stone stairs and onto the sidewalk below. He groaned lightly and reached up to touch his head. His wound *throbbed*.

He stumbled to his feet and shook his head.

No time, he thought. *I need to get them back.*

Makoto surged forward towards the car and called again.

"W-Wait…" Makoto called, his tongue feeling heavy in his mouth. "Don't… please don't take them, I…"

Makoto stumbled forward again and landed on his hands and knees in front of Sato's feet. He glanced up at her, feeling each raindrop pelt into his back. He swallowed hard, trying to get his voice to cooperate.

Do something! Makoto yelled at himself. *Get them back, you idiot!*

"Don't take them away from me! Please!" Makoto shouted from the ground. "They're all I have left! *Please!"*

Makoto lowered his head until his forehead touched the pavement, bowing at Sato's feet.

"Please…" his voice whispered. "Please don't take them away from me. *Please.* I'll do *anything*. Please, *please…"* His voice shook with each begging breath.

After a few moments of begging, he felt the rain let up on his back. He glanced up to see Sato leaning over and covering him with her umbrella. Her face was pulled into the saddest look he had seen on her face.

"I know this is hard," Sato said. "But we *have* to do this, Tachibana-san. There's no other way around it."

Makoto's eyes filled with more tears and he shut them tightly, leaning his head back down to sob. He felt the rain return to his back as Sato stood back up and turned towards the car.

"I'll give you the information you'll need to keep in contact with them," Sato said. "But for now, we need to keep them in our custody."

She opened the door and climbed inside, collapsing her umbrella and shaking it outside of the door. She grabbed the handle to the car door and paused, taking in Makoto's form.

"Don't lose hope, Tachibana-san," Sato said in a whisper.

Then, the door slammed shut.

And with that, the car drove away, leaving Makoto soaked and defeated on the cold sidewalk.

Tremors began to wrack his body at the realization of what happened. His lungs seized in his chest and refused to work properly as he struggled for each agonizing breath.

They're gone… they're gone.

What do I do?

What do I do?!

Makoto clawed at his hair, his fingers threatening to rip it out. His head hurt, his arms hurt, his *heart* hurt…

Everything, all at once, ached and burned and throbbed.

Who… who can I talk to?

Who can help me?!

Who can—

Blue eyes.

A small blue dolphin.

White chef's uniform.

"Are you okay?"

His childhood friend.

And by the way, you guys are always welcome to my place.

"Haru-chan…" Makoto whispered. "I… I need to… to go to Haru-chan."

Makoto pushed himself up onto his wobbling legs and turned around. He walked past his apartment complex and trudged through the rain.

And once he had safely crossed the street, he ran.

Haru plopped down on his couch and sighed as he ran the towel through his hair. Walking home in the frigid rain had made his bones stiff so he had taken a bath to warm up his aching body. He thought it would calm his nerves as well, but he ended up checking his phone every few minutes, making his screen smudged and wet.

He pouted his lips and turned his head to look at the clock on the wall. It was well after nine. The inspection should have ended by now.

So why hadn't Makoto called yet?

Haru dug into his pocket for his phone and glanced down at the screen. There were no new texts or missed calls.

He sighed, pocketing his phone once again and slumping on the couch cushion. He could hear the rain pattering against his window and he looked out at the city. The rain had smeared his view from the city below, and he knew that there was no cover on the roof. Haru groaned. He really wanted to go on the roof.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang, indicating someone was downstairs.

Haru jolted on the couch and sat up, turning his head to stare at the front door. There was a light flashing next to the screen.

Who would be asking to come up at this time of night?

He pushed himself up from the couch and walked to the door, reaching out to press the button to turn on the screen.

When the screen flashed to life, Haru gasped.

Standing on the street below was Makoto, and there was blood flowing from his bandage.

"Makoto?!" Haru gasped. "What happened? Are you okay?!"

Makoto's eyes seemed glazed as he glanced up towards the camera, blinking slowly.

"H-Haru…" Makoto's voice whimpered.

Haru's heart squeezed painfully inside his chest.

Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

"Here, I'll let you in. Come up to my apartment," Haru said quickly, reaching over to press a button next to the screen. Makoto nodded right before the screen went black.

Haru sidestepped to the front door and ripped it open, launching himself out to the hallway. He glanced down the hall towards the elevators and realized that there was no way that Makoto would be up here that fast.

Haru sighed and began to pace in front of his door, his teeth chewing on his thumbnail.

What happened? Haru thought.

Why did he look so miserable?

What happened to his head?

And…

And where were Ran and Ren?

Haru's stomach was churning uncomfortably as he paced faster, begging for the elevators to work faster.

After a few more moments of alert pacing, Haru heard shuffling from down the hall. He stopped in his tracks and turned around, seeing a tall figure loom towards him.

"Makoto!" Haru called, taking a step forward to meet him.

His breath caught when he took in Makoto's appearance.

Makoto's clothes were completely drenched, causing his body to shiver uncontrollably. There were spots of red on his blue button-up shirt, the blood still dripping lightly from his wound and down to his chin. His eyes were red and puffy and glazed over, as if in some sort of trance.

"Makoto…" Haru whispered. He grabbed Makoto by his arms and gently tugged him forward. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Makoto did not protest nor speak as he obediently followed Haru into his apartment. Haru was about to kneel down to take off Makoto's shoes but stopped when he saw his bare feet standing on the genkan.

"You… you didn't wear shoes?" Haru asked softly, looking up at Makoto.

Makoto hesitated, avoiding Haru's eyes. Then, he shook his head slowly from side to side.

Haru held back a sigh and then grabbed his arm again, leading him to the bathroom down the hall. Once they were in the bathroom, Haru looked him over, taking note of his head wound and his wet clothes.

"You're bleeding. Did your stitches come undone?" Haru asked, running his hand along the wet bandages around his head.

Makoto did not respond and he averted his eyes, staring off into space. He looked dead on his feet, and it made Haru's gut twist.

He was acting strange.

Haru grabbed onto Makoto's collar and tried to get Makoto's attention, but then he noticed how wet Makoto's clothes were.

"You're soaked to the bone. You have to be freezing," Haru commented. "We've got to get you out of these clothes."

Makoto stood eerily still as Haru started to unbutton his shirt. His shirt was cold to the touch, making Haru wince. Did he skip the train and walk all the way to his apartment in the pouring rain? What was Makoto thinking?

He got halfway down Makoto's shirt when he heard a soft whimper from above him.

"They're gone…" Makoto said lowly.

Haru's hands froze on Makoto's buttons. He tilted his head up to look at Makoto. Tears were brimming Makoto's eyes and his shoulders were trembling fiercely.

"Who's gone?" Haru asked. He leaned up toward Makoto, grabbing his shirt. "*Who* Makoto?"

Makoto choked on a sob, tears running down his cheeks. He inhaled sharply and finally, *finally* locked eyes with Haru.

"Ran a-and Ren. She… she took them, Haru. She *took* them away and… and they're *gone*," Makoto wailed, squeezing his eyes shut and forcing more tears to spill down his cheeks.

Haru's eyes widened and his brows pushed together.

The twins are… gone?

"What do I do, Haru?" Makoto asked, hanging his head. "They're gone and it's my fault and… and I don't know what to *do*. Haru, please just… please, Haru… what do I do?"

Makoto had started going into hysterics, sobs wracking his entire body as he shook. He leaned back against the wall, his legs giving into his weight.

Haru lunged forward and grabbed him under his arms before he could collapse to the ground. He gently eased him onto the floor and cradled Makoto's head to his chest, being cautious of his wound on his temple.

"Easy, Makoto," Haru said. "I've got you. I've got you."

"What do I do… I… I don't know what to *do*…"

"We'll figure it out, Makoto," Haru said, stroking his hair gently and holding his shoulder tight.

"Please don't leave me…" Makoto begged, his voice cracking. "Please... don't leave me alone..."

The sound brought tears to Haru's eyes and he squeezed Makoto tighter closer to his chest.

"I've got you, Makoto," Haru said, his own voice cracking with sobs. "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to check out my Tumblr for any updates or info regarding my fics. Ask me a question if you'd like!

Aaand if anyone would like to do any kind of art for this fic, feel free to do so! :D

And A Place to Rest My Head

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone!!!
I am SO sorry for not responding to comments!! But I read every single one and they all touched my heart. Thank you guys so much.

And THANK YOU SO MUCH, Tayu-chan!!!! You really saved me by helping me out on this chapter. Thank you for helping me get this out on time, I owe you so much!!!

ALSO.
THERE'S MORE FANART. Go check it out, it's AMAZING!!
This one is done by the awesome velvloid!!
It's based off of the hospital scene in Chapter 19!! :) Check it out here!

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain tapped lightly against the tall windows. It was a soft, methodical sound.

It was enough to soothe the pound in Makoto's head, but nothing could fix the heavy ache in his chest.

He was sitting on Haru's couch, donned in a new t-shirt and sweatpants that were a little too small for him, but at least they were dry and warm. There was a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and he had a fresh bandage wrapped around his head.

Haru had concluded that only one stitch had come undone on his temple. Luckily, Haru had some liquid stitch in his medicine cabinet and fixed him right up. Makoto was thankful that Haru did not force him back to the hospital.

Makoto sniffed and shivered, wrapping the blanket tightly around his shoulders.

I lost them, he thought, hunching over on his knees. He squeezed his eyes shut and shuddered as a sob ripped through him.

They're gone.

His body shook as tears threatened to fall from his swollen and tired eyes.

And it's all my fault.

"Makoto."

Makoto jumped and opened his eyes to see a green mug right in front of his face. He lifted his head to see Haru standing in front of him, his blue eyes narrowed sympathetically.

"Tea," Haru said as an explanation. "It'll calm your nerves."

Makoto sucked in a sharp breath and then held it in his stomach. He felt as if he would puke.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto said softly as he took the mug with shaking hands.

He glanced down at the brown, steaming liquid inside the cup and breathed it in. It smelled delicious, making the ache in his chest just a fraction lighter. He took a sip and tears pricked in his eyes.

It tasted like his mother's homemade tea.

Mom… Dad…

Why can't you be here?

A hand gently squeezed Makoto's shoulder, making him look up from his tea. Haru blinked down at him, a silent question in his eyes. Makoto sighed and shook his head, lowering it down to stare back at the tea in his hands.

He had never felt more miserable in his life.

Haru released Makoto's shoulder and then moved to sit next to him on the couch. They sat in silence for a moment, Haru giving Makoto the space and time to calm down. Once the sniffling had ceased, Haru took in a slow breath.

"Do you know what happens next?" Haru asked warily. He knew Makoto was on edge and he wanted to approach this topic as carefully as he could.

Makoto winced and his hands tightened around the mug, turning his knuckles white.

"I… I don't know," Makoto admitted. "She said that she would send me information about it tomorrow."

Haru's brows upturned slightly and he turned his head to look down at the floor. He listened to Makoto's shaky breathing and waited until he calmed once again.

"Where are they taking the twins?" Haru asked.

"The… the foster home on the other side of Tokyo," Makoto said.

"Oh," Haru said. "Will… will they be there for very long?"

Makoto shook his head and shrugged. "It… it depends on how quickly they can find a f-foster home for them."

He choked on a cry and shut his eyes, lifting up a hand to cover his mouth. Haru reached over and rubbed his back, gently and softly shushing him. Makoto's breaths stuttered as he tried to calm himself, his other hand gripping the mug like a vice.

"It's okay, Makoto," Haru said softly. "Take deep breaths."

Makoto's breaths slowed again and he released a long, shuddering sigh into his palm. He took his hand from his mouth, his arm trembling fiercely, and wrapped his fingers back around the mug. His drink had gone cold.

"What about visiting them?" Haru asked, keeping his hand on Makoto's back for support. "It's not like you can't go see them at school or something, right?"

Makoto's shoulders rose and fell in another helpless shrug as his head moved back and forth.

"I don't know," Makoto answered. "It all happened so fast, I… I barely remember anything she said, and…"

"Your siblings will be placed in foster care for now. Here is the information for this."

Makoto groaned and reached up to rub his forehead. Of *course* he had to leave that sheet of paper in his apartment. In his frazzled state, he had left practically everything at his apartment, his shoes included.

When he groaned again, Haru leaned closer in alarm, his blue eyes looking over him.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Haru asked. His hand moved up to his face and he turned Makoto's head to look at the wound hidden underneath the bandages. "Is it your head? Does it hurt?"

"Oh. No, it doesn't. Sorry," Makoto said, almost pathetically. He averted his eyes and winced. "I just remembered that Sato-san gave me a paper that had information on it about the foster care system. I left it at the apartment. I didn't even get to read it."

Makoto let out another groan and heavy sigh, feeling as if the whole weight of the world was sitting on his shoulders. It was beginning to be exhausting.

Haru rubbed soft circles into Makoto's back, his warmth radiating through his palm.

"You should rest here for the night," Haru said, pressing his hand in between Makoto's shoulder blades.

"Are… are you sure?" Makoto asked, looking at him with wide eyes.

Haru nodded once, short and firm.

"Of course," Haru said. "We'll go back to your apartment in the morning and look at that form that Sato-san gave you."

Makoto considered it for a moment, tugging the blanket more firmly around his shoulders. Then, he nodded, feeling his exhaustion finally taking over.

"Okay," Makoto said softly. "Thank you, Haru."

"Mmn. It's no trouble," Haru said. "Here. I'll reheat your tea. You just rest for now."

"Oh, thank you, Haru," Makoto said, watching Haru as he took the mug from his limp hands.

Haru walked to the kitchen, leaving Makoto to stare out of the rain-covered windows at the blurred city below. Makoto winced, his hands curling into tight fists in his lap.

I'm sorry, Ran, Ren, Makoto thought bitterly as tears pricked at his eyes again.

I wish I could take you back.

"Take us *back!"*

"I'm sorry, but you need to come with us for now."

"You don't understand! We don't want to live with someone else. We want to be with Onii-chan!"

"Ran, you need to sit back. This is dangerous."

The twins sat in the back of the car, Ren squished in between a frantic Ran and one of Sato's scary assistants. His chest was hitching with violent hiccups as his sobs made his entire body shake.

Ran, on the other hand, was doing her best to climb into the front seat to claw at Sato's arm. There were angry tears running down her cheeks as she yelled at Sato further, begging her to turn the car around.

"Please, *please*, Sato-san!" Ran begged. "We need to be with Onii-chan! He f-fell down the steps and is probably hurt and—"

"Ran," Sato said, turning her head. She grabbed onto Ran's hands and pulled them off of her sleeve. "I know you're upset, but there is no other option. Your brother failed to meet the requirements."

"But he took care of us!" Ran yelled. "He took us in and took care of us! He did the best he could. We don't want to—"

"*That's enough."*

Ran snapped her mouth shut and Ren flinched at Sato's cold tone. Sato's eyes were sharply fixed on the twins, her lips drawn into a thin line. There was a slight twitch in her brow, which could either be from frustration or sadness. The twins were unsure which emotion she was feeling but it was obvious she was showing contained anger behind her steely eyes.

"Actions have consequences. And when rules are broken, this is what happens," Sato said through her teeth.

She took a minute to take a deep breath, closing her eyes and dipping her head slightly. When she opened her eyes again, the malice that was once there had disappeared. Instead, a sympathetic frown replaced it, making her face fall.

"I know this is difficult to take in, but you two need to hold on. You will be taken care of, I promise you that," Sato said.

Ran's brows furrowed as more tears spilled from the corners of her eyes.

"And what about Onii-chan?" Ran asked, her voice choked and strained.

"Ran…" Ren whimpered from the back seat, his eyes squinting when more tears threatened to fall.

"He just got out of the hospital. He fell. He *fell!* Didn't you see it?" Ran asked. She sniffled loudly and then furiously wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her sleeve. Then she glared up at Sato with her teeth bared and her hands in fists. "What if he passes out again? What if he bleeds to death?!"

"W-What?" Ren startled, his face paling.

"We want to be with him!" Ran shouted. "Why can't you let us be with him?"

Sato sighed and turned around to face the front, watching as the driver of the car made a turn down some road that the twins did not recognize.

"We will talk about this later," Sato said.

Ran leaned forward again, ready to claw at Sato's arm.

"But—"

Suddenly, she was pulled backward until her back touched the seat. She glanced up and saw Sato's assistant staring down at her with a blank expression.

"This discussion is over," Sato said, turning back around to face the front.

A heavy silence fell in the car, making Ren hunch in on himself more. He sniffed and shut his eyes tight as more tears squeezed out and down his cheeks. He thought through the last few months, wondering where it all went wrong. He remembered making his brother late for work, and the fight with his sister that ended up in a suspension.

But Makoto had gotten a new job, and he had made up with his sister. Everything seemed to be going smoothly lately.

But now, everything had seemed to spiral out of control.

How did everything change so fast? Ren thought.

What happened?

Is… is this my fault?

"Sato-san, we need to stop to refuel."

"What?"

Ren snapped his eyes open and watched as Sato leaned forward to stare down at the console in front of the steering wheel.

"How much further can we go?" Sato asked.

"Not too much further," her assistant in the driver seat said. "We'll need to make a stop at a gas station."

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose underneath her glasses.

"All right. There should be one up ahead," Sato said. She turned back to look at the assistant in the back seat. "When we stop, can you grab my files from the trunk?"

"Yes, ma'am," the man bellowed next to Ren, making him jump at the sound of his voice.

"Good. There's a station over there. Go ahead and pull over," Sato said. She took out her phone and then turned her head back to look at the twins, giving them a small, sympathetic frown. "Sorry. This won't take long. Just sit tight, okay?"

Ren bit his lip. He secretly hoped this stop would last a lifetime.

Suddenly, he felt Ran's elbow nudging his arm. He turned his head to his twin sister.

Ran was staring back at him, a determined sparkle in her eyes. She leaned close to his side and whispered in his ear as quietly as she could.

"This is our chance," she said.

Ren whipped his head to look at her and blinked.

"W-What?" Ren whispered back, looking at her incredulously. Panic was clearly written on his face.

As the car turned into the gas station, Ran leaned close to his side, her body stiff.

"Get ready to unbuckle your seatbelt," Ran whispered.

Ren's eyes widened.

"W-Wait. What do you—"

Ran put a finger in front of her mouth and shook her head. She faced forward, Ren following her eyes to see the car pulling in next to a gas pump.

"On my signal, follow me," Ran said.

Ren blinked at her, his mouth agape.

What in the world was she talking about?!

His heart rate had picked up a bit, pounding harder against his chest. He felt nervous and worried that Ran would somehow get them in trouble.

But he had to trust her. She seemed to know what she was doing.

The car pulled to a stop next to the pump, the assistant in the driver's seat turning off the car. Both assistants unbuckled their seatbelts and stepped out of the car, one heading to the pump and the other stepping to the trunk. Sato was scrolling through her phone, the glow reflecting off of her face.

Ran's thumb wandered down to her seatbelt, her elbow nudging Ren's arm.

"Ready," Ran mouthed.

Ren's eyes widened but he moved his hand down to his seatbelt as well.

Ran turned her head to the side, waiting until the trunk opened. Then, she looked at the gas pump. The other assistant had his back turned.

Ran unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Now!" she stage whispered.

Ren gasped and quickly reached down to unbuckle his seatbelt. He watched in slight panic as Ran unlocked the door and threw it open. He scrambled to follow.

"Hey!" Sato yelled from the passenger seat. "Where do you guys think you're going?! Get back here!"

Ren finally made it out of the car and sprinted to catch up with Ran, hearing the sounds of shouts echoing from the gas station. The air was freezing, and the light mist of rain did not help them feel any warmer. They both stepped in deep puddles along the way, making their shoes and pants soaking wet.

After running for a block, Ran heard the sounds of pounding footsteps from behind. She glanced behind them both, her eyes widening when she saw the two assistants running after them.

"Ren, this way!" Ran shouted, turning a corner.

"Where are we going, Ran?!" Ren shouted from behind her.

"Anywhere we can!" Ran shouted back. "Sato-san's goons are right behind us!"

Ren squeaked, daring to turn his head back. And sure enough, the two assistants were a few blocks behind.

"Ren, let's turn here!" Ran said. "We need a place to hide!"

"But where?!" Ren wailed. "We can't go back to our apartment! They know where we live!"

Ran bit her lip, knowing her brother was right. They had to come up with a different place.

"What about Nanase-san's apartment?" Ran asked over her shoulder.

Ren looked up at her desperately. "Didn't Onii-chan have to give his information to Sato-san when we stayed there before?!"

Ran bit her lip, turning her head back to focus on running down the wet path. Once again, Ren was right. It was too risky to go over to Nanase's apartment, just in case their older brother decided to give Sato his address.

But where else could they hide?

The park?

The school?

Think, Ran! Think!

Where is a place we feel safest?

Safe…

Nanase…

Ran's eyes widened. She turned her head back to look at Ren, her eyes sparkling once again.

"Ren!" Ran shouted. "I know where to go!"

Ren glanced up at her, still keeping up with her fast pace.

"Where?!" he asked.

"We need to go to Nanase's!" she answered.

"Eh?! But, Ran! We can't!" Ren shouted back. "They'll know to look at his apartment!"

"Not at his apartment, you dummy!" Ran shouted back. She turned to face the pathway, moving to sprint faster. "We're going to his restaurant!"

Recognition lit up on Ren's face, shocked that Ran would suggest it. How would they even get in

there? Wouldn't that get them in even *more* trouble?!

"Hey, you two!"

Ran and Ren gasped and turned their heads back to the sidewalk behind them. About a block away were those two assistants and they were quickly catching up to them.

Ren whimpered, feeling the panic start to take over.

"What do we do, Ran?!" Ren yelled to his sister as they ran past another building.

Ran grit her teeth and glanced around, thinking about the best route to get to the restaurant.

Think, Ran… c'mon, Ran thought to herself.

We guided Sousuke all around this city without Onii-chan's help.

So you can figure out the best path.

C'mon, Ran! Think, think, think!

Her eyes moved to see a large intersection up ahead, the road filled with busy cars.

This could be it.

This could be their chance to lose them.

"There!" Ran said to Ren, pointing to the intersection up ahead. "We'll cross the road and lose them in the next street!"

Ren balked, appalled. "But the light is *red,* Ran!"

Ran swallowed, her nails digging into her palms.

"I know."

Ren blinked at her with wide, horrified eyes. Ran had gone completely *crazy!*

They were nearing the intersection, the two men still hot on their tails. The light to cross was still red but the traffic had slowed, leaving a large gap of empty space.

"*Now, Ren!"* Ran shouted.

Ren shook his head, his steps starting to slow.

"B-But—" Ren stuttered, looking towards the road and then back at the two men.

Ran grit her teeth. They had no time for this!

She suddenly latched on his wrist and yanked him forward, Ren squeaking as he pulled towards the edge of the road. They pushed past the few people who stood waiting at the light and then launched into the street, ignoring the gasps and shouts from the people behind them.

Ren struggled to keep up, his body still in shock that they were breaking so many rules in one night. But they made it beyond one side of the road, leaping over the divider, and then hurried to the cross the oncoming traffic.

They were almost there.

Almost to the other side of the road.

And those two men were not following.

They could do it.

They could make it—

A flash of headlights startled Ren out of his thoughts. He glanced to the side and saw a large truck headed straight towards them.

He nearly froze out of shock but he felt a sharp tug on his arm. He looked forward and saw Ran looking back at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Don't stop!" Ran yelled. She still had her look of determination on her face but her eyes were shining with stress and fear.

Ren shuddered, feeling tears well up in his eyes.

Were they really going to die? Here? And being hit by a truck?

It was nearly the same as their parents' fates.

Ren wanted to cry at the irony of it all. He felt a tear slide down his cheek.

It was the end. This is how they would leave their brother.

Onii-chan…

Ren's heart skipped a beat.

If they were to die tonight, that would leave Makoto all alone.

And that…

No, Ren thought. *We can't leave Onii-chan all alone!*

Ren turned his hand and grabbed onto Ran's wrist.

I'm going to see Onii-chan again!

Ren surged forward, pulling Ran with him. He caught her wide eyes as he yanked her forward, sending them both diving towards the sidewalk. They fell and rolled on the concrete, Ren's hand still attached to Ran's wrist.

Ran and Ren recovered quickly, however, and watched as the truck passed by, its horn blaring. They panted, both shaking with adrenaline, and stared up at the crosswalk. The light was still red, and those two assistants were still on the other side of the intersection. For a moment, they were frozen in shock, both staring out at the road as cars passed by.

Ran was the first to snap out of it, quickly rising to her feet and pulling Ren up with her.

"C'mon, c'mon," Ran said in a shaky whisper. Ren blinked back to life and nodded, quickly running to stay by her side. "Don't stop running, Ren. Keep going!"

The two ran far from the intersection, leaving the two assistants on the other side of the road.

"You should probably try to sleep."

"I don't think I can. My mind won't shut off."

Makoto and Haru were back to sitting side by side on the couch, half of Makoto's tea gone. It felt like an eternity had passed since the twins were taken, and Makoto's energy had all but left him. But his despair was preventing him from falling asleep, and his guilt was eating away at him too much to rest.

"I'll feel guilty if I sleep," Makoto said softly, looking the most vulnerable that Haru had ever seen him. "What if the twins don't have comfy beds at the foster care center? What if they can't sleep?"

Haru winced and gently touched Makoto's shoulder. "Makoto…"

"How can I just sleep in a comfortable bed when they could be sleeping on the floor?" Makoto asked, covering his eyes with his hands.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Haru said. "You need the rest, Makoto. You're physically and mentally spent."

Makoto sighed and scrubbed at his eyes weakly.

"I know," Makoto said miserably. "I just… I wish that I could've done more for them. I wish that I hadn't been such a horrible brother."

Haru felt a spark of anger strike his chest and he squeezed Makoto's shoulder. He absolutely hated it when Makoto called himself horrible.

"Makoto, you—"

Suddenly, a loud ringing pierced through the air, making both Haru and Makoto jolt. They glanced back at the kitchen counter, seeing Makoto's cell phone light up with a phone call.

"Oh, that's my phone," Makoto said softly. He sighed and hung his head, making Haru turn to look at him. "It's probably Sousuke. Ugh, he's going to be so upset…"

Haru frowned sympathetically at him. When he saw that Makoto made no move to retrieve the phone, Haru walked over to grab it himself. He could probably calm Sousuke down. Or, at the very least, prevent Sousuke from blowing up at Makoto. Haru sighed and shook his head at the thought. He knew answering the phone would mean stepping in the way of Sousuke's wrath.

He picked up Makoto's phone, ready to hit the green button to answer, but he froze at the name on the screen.

"Um… Makoto," Haru called from the kitchen.

"Hm?" Makoto hummed glumly from the couch.

"It's… it's not Yamazaki," Haru said, turning towards him.

Makoto straightened his back and turned to look at Haru with a perplexed expression.

"Then who is it?" Makoto asked.

Haru walked over to him and showed him his phone. Makoto squinted and peered at the name blinking on the screen.

Incoming Call:

Sato-san

Makoto's stomach did somersaults.

What could have happened?

Did Sato change her mind?!

Makoto quickly took his phone from Haru's hand and answered, shakily putting the phone up to his ear.

"Um… hello?"

"Tachibana-san."

Makoto's heart dangerously flipped inside his chest. Sato's voice sounded so fragile and weak. It sounded as if she had been crying.

Wait.

Did… did they get into some kind of accident?

Breathe. Just breathe. You don't know anything yet, Makoto told himself, willing his mind not to panic. He cleared his throat and swallowed.

"Sato-san? Is everything okay?" Makoto asked.

Sato sniffed and Makoto was on high alert.

She was definitely crying.

"The twins, they… they ran out of the car and into the city."

Makoto jumped to his feet, the blanket falling off of his shoulders and onto the floor.

"What?!" Makoto shouted, making Haru flinch. His brows then furrowed and he walked closer to Makoto in worry, shooting Makoto a concerned look. "They ran out of the car?!"

Haru's brows shot up to his forehead.

"Yes," Sato said weakly.

"Do you know where they went?" Makoto asked, flailing out his free hand desperately.

"N-No," Sato said. "I've already called the police but… we lost them at an intersection."

Makoto inhaled sharply, his blood turning to ice.

"Where did they leave the car?" Makoto asked. "Where in the city did they run off?"

"Um, the gas station on the west side of town. It's near the power plant," Sato said.

"Okay…" Makoto said shakily, trying to picture what Sato had descripted. Once he got his mental map in mind, he nodded. "Okay. I'll help look for them."

"I'm sorry, Tachibana-san," Sato apologized. "And thank you."

Makoto quickly ended the call without a proper goodbye and he whirled around to look at Haru with wild eyes.

"What happened?" Haru asked frantically.

"The twins…" Makoto said, his mind still in a state of shock. "They… they escaped Sato-san's car and ran out into the city."

Haru's eyes widened in concern. "Did they find them?"

Makoto shook his head, his face grave. "No."

"Okay," Haru said, and then he quickly turned towards the front door. "Then let's go find them."

Makoto's face flushed and he nodded once, touched that Haru cared so much.

"Okay!"

They hurried to the front door and put on shoes and jackets, Haru giving Makoto a spare pair of sneakers to wear. Then, they rushed out the door and out of the apartment complex to the wet sidewalk below.

"Do you know where they would go?" Haru asked.

Makoto thought about, his teeth chewing on his lip.

Where would they go at this time of night?

"They could've gone back to my apartment," Makoto suggested.

Haru nodded and took a step forward, ready to start running.

"Okay," he said. "Let's start there."

"I think we lost them, Ren!"

"Do you think they know where we're going?"

"I don't know, but don't stop now!"

The two twins quickly headed down a sidewalk and turned another corner, sprinting down a few more blocks.

"How much further?" Ren asked.

"Our school should be just ahead… see! There it is!" Ran said, pointing to the large building hidden behind the gate.

They passed by their middle school, barely even acknowledging it as they rushed across the unoccupied intersection and down the last block.

"There it is! It's Nanase's restaurant!" Ran exclaimed.

"Finally…" Ren said in between pants.

They ran straight up to the front door of the famous *Nanase's Rest House*, both slowing to a stop and staring up at the darkened lights.

"It's closed," Ran said through pants.

Ren hunched over and grabbed his knees for support.

"H-How do we get in?" Ren asked. "Nanase-san is usually good about locking the place up."

Ran bit her lip and glanced around, her eyes stopping to see the narrow alleyway next to the restaurant. She shuffled over to the edge and glanced down at the brick wall of the restaurant.

There must be some way… Ran thought as she scanned the wall.

Then, her eyes landed on a small window.

"There!" Ran shouted, pointing up at it.

Ren huffed out a few more pants before jogging to her side. He peered up to where she was pointing and saw the window. It was narrow and a little high up; too high for one of them to reach on their own. And that was the least of their worries. What if the window would not open?

"It wouldn't be open, would it?" Ren asked, looking at Ran with scrunched up eyebrows.

"Only one way to find out," Ran said. She walked to the wall and gestured for Ren to follow. "Give me a boost."

"Eh?!" Ren squeaked. "Why do *I* have to be the one to give you a boost?"

"Because you're stronger than I am," Ran explained.

"Huh?! That's not true!" Ren retorted.

"Fine. Then I weigh less than you," Ran said as she rolled her eyes. "Now stop complaining! Help me up!"

Ren sniffed and wiped away the last of the tears and rain from his face. He walked to the wall and crouched down, waiting for Ran to get on his shoulders. Once she was securely on, Ren stood up, wobbling as he tried to maintain his balance.

"Over to the right more," Ran instructed, and Ren shifted slowly. "There, there! Stop."

Ran's hands moved to the window and she pushed as hard as she could. But the glass pane did not budge.

"Is it locked?" Ren asked from below, his voice sounded a bit strained.

"Ugh, I don't know! It won't… move!" She pushed again, grunting when the window still did not move. "Ugh, it's not working at all."

Ren's eye twitched when a stray rain droplet fell on his face as he craned his neck to look up at his sister.

"D-Did you try pulling?" Ren suggested from below.

Ran gave him a flat look but studied the window again. And lo and behold, there was a latch on the window. Ran pouted and grabbed the latch, tugging it forward in an easy fashion.

"Did it open?" Ren asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Ran grumbled. "Okay, hold still."

"Ah! Ran, what are you doing?!"

Ran moved to stand on Ren's shoulders, Ren struggling to stay upright under her weight. She ducked under the top of the window and jumped, gripping the edges of the wall on the inside. He crawled her way off of Ren's shoulders, almost falling inside. But she managed to catch herself before she could plummet to the ground.

She ended up standing on something before she completely reached the ground, but it was too dark to tell what exactly it was. She glanced around the darkened room, trying to pinpoint where she was in the restaurant. She squinted, trying to see.

On the far side of the room, she spotted several pans and spoons hanging from the ceiling.

Oh, Ran thought. *This is the back of the kitchen.*

She glanced down at her feet and noticed the sink that rested mere centimeters away. She was standing on the back counter.

"Ran! Hey!" Ren's voice called from outside. "Don't leave m-me out here!"

Ran scrambled back up to the window and poked her head outside, spotting her twin brother shivering in the misty rain. She stood on her tiptoes and stretched her arm outside the window.

"Here, grab on!" Ran called.

Ren hesitated, his eyes glancing back and forth in the alleyway, but then he rushed forward and jumped. Ran managed to firmly grab his hand on the first try and she leaned backward, using her weight to pull her brother up. Ren flailed a bit, his legs kicking against the brick wall as he tried to shimmy up the wall.

Finally, Ran pulled Ren through the window and they both came crashing down on the counter, Ren bouncing off and falling to the floor. They both groaned from the impact.

"Ouch," Ran fussed. She hopped off the counter and walked to her brother, watching him as he sat up from the floor. "Well, we at least made it inside."

Ren nodded sheepishly from the ground and glanced around the kitchen. Then, he turned back to Ran, his voice small when he spoke.

"Now… now what do we do?" Ren asked, suddenly teary-eyed once again.

Ran bit her lip and glanced around at the kitchen. It was still too dark to see, and neither of them had a phone. It was getting late, and by now, it was possible that Sato would have called the police.

Ran sighed, her face crestfallen. She shook her head and then plopped down on the floor next to Ren.

"I'm not sure," Ran said. "I guess we just… wait."

More tears pricked at Ren's eyes at her suggestion and he sniffed, trying to keep the tears at bay. He pulled his legs to his chest and hugged his knees, leaning against his sister for warmth.

"Do you… do you think Onii-chan will come for us?" Ren asked.

Ran sighed and leaned against her brother, equally welcoming the warmth.

"I don't know," she said softly.

Ren leaned his forehead down until it touched his knees and he choked on a sob.

"I want to go home," Ren whimpered, tears starting to fall down his cheeks.

Ran winced and she turned to look at her brother. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Onii-chan will come for us," Ran said, her own voice wobbling. "I know he will."

"Ran, Ren?! Are you here?!"

"Ran, Ren!"

Haru and Makoto searched up and down the apartment complex for any sign of the twins. They even knocked on a few doors to ask the neighbors if they had seen them.

But their efforts were fruitless.

"They're not here," Makoto said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Where else could they have gone?" Haru asked.

Makoto shook his head, wracking his brain for ideas.

If they did not go back home, then where could they have gone?

What if… what if they did not go anywhere at all and…

What if they had gotten kidnapped?

"Makoto."

Makoto jolted and gasped when he felt a hand on his shoulder and was immediately met with blue eyes.

"Calm down," Haru commanded gently. "Just breathe."

Makoto watched Haru's chest and tried to mimic its movements, taking in shuddering breaths. That was when he realized how badly he was trembling.

"There. That's better," Haru said, his thumb rubbing circles on Makoto's shoulder. "Now let's think. Where else would they have gone?"

Makoto closed his eyes. "I… I don't…"

"Would they have gone to the park?" Haru suggested.

"No," Makoto said while shaking his head. "It's too wet for that, I think."

Haru bit his lip, squeezing Makoto's shoulder harder. He glanced down at the ground, staring at both of their wet feet. Makoto was right. There would have been no covering for them at the park to hide out from the nasty weather.

"Okay," Haru said, looking back up at him. "What about their school?"

Makoto met Haru's gaze and pondered over it. He swallowed and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's… I guess it's possible," Makoto said.

Haru nodded. "Okay. Let's go check there."

Makoto nodded back.

"Okay."

"Where is it… where… aha! There it is!"

Ran's finger finally found the light switch in the room and she flipped it, making the lights in the kitchen flicker to life. They both groaned and shielded their eyes for a moment from the blinding lights.

"I never knew how bright it was in here," Ren groaned.

"Mmn," Ran hummed, rubbing her eyes. She dropped her hands to her sides and glanced around. "Well, at least we can see now."

Ren sniffed and also dropped his hands, nodding and humming. He went back to hugging his knees, shivering from the cold.

"You think there's any blankets or anything?" Ren asked with chattering teeth. "It's cold."

Ran pursed her lips and glanced up at the cupboards near the light switch. She reached up and opened them, finding only stacks of pans and lids. She went on to search in the other cupboards, sidestepping down the line of cabinets, until she reached one of the taller closets. She opened it up and smiled.

"Here, Ren!" Ran said, grabbing the closet's contents and throwing it at him.

Ren flailed as a large, white cloth landed on top of his face and head. He scrambled to get it off and he glanced down.

It was a chef's uniform.

"It looks like what Nanase-san wears," Ren said, pulling it up to his shoulders.

Ran smiled and plopped down next to him, grabbing some of the uniform and snuggling in beside him.

"You're right," she said.

"I hope he doesn't get mad at us for using it," Ren said sheepishly.

Ran frowned and sighed, covering up her arms when a shiver rippled through her body.

"I don't think he will."

"Makoto, slow down!"

"But, Haru, what if they've left?! What if they wandered off?! I've got to see if they're all right!"

"If you don't slow down, you'll fall and hurt yourself!"

Makoto was paces ahead of Haru, his legs carrying him faster and faster down the sidewalk. Haru clicked his tongue, cursing his slow legs. Why did he have to be such a slow runner?!

"Makoto, come on! I don't want you to hurt your head!" Haru called, hoping that Makoto would slow down.

But Makoto ignored his cries and rushed forward instead, pushing his legs down the sidewalk.

"We lost them at an intersection…"

Makoto cringed, shutting his eyes tight.

He had never let them cross an intersection alone. The cars were too dangerous. But now, they had run out and into the dark streets. And they had crossed the street by themselves.

Did they even watch for cars?

"We're so proud of you, Makoto."

"We love you very mu—"

Makoto's nails dug into his palms, threatening to draw blood, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

Please, Makoto prayed. *Mom, Dad, help me find them.*

Please help me find them.

Please keep them safe.

Makoto inhaled sharply, a sob crawling up his throat.

I can't lose them. I can't lose them. I can't… I can't lose them, too!

Suddenly, Makoto's foot slid out from under him and he lost his balance. His arms flailed as he fell forward, landing harshly on his hands and knees in a puddle.

"Makoto!" Haru called out, rushing up to his side. He crouched down beside him and held his shoulders.

Makoto shuddered and coughed, shaking his head from the spout of dizziness that washed over him. He glanced up at Haru, his green eyes clouded.

"Are you okay?" Haru asked, his blue eyes bright.

Makoto sighed and hung his head, staring down at the wet sidewalk. He nodded sluggishly, his head feeling incredibly heavy on his shoulders. Haru seemed satisfied with this and he relaxed a

little, his grip on Makoto's shoulders loosening. He watched as Makoto sat back on his feet and glanced up at the surrounding buildings.

"Where are we?" Makoto asked, the lights of the city blurry in his vision.

Haru glanced up at the surrounding buildings and the back down to Makoto, concern written on his face.

"You don't recognize it?" Haru asked.

Makoto glanced up at Haru's face and then up at the building next to them. His eyes widened a fraction when his vision cleared.

It was the restaurant.

"Oh," Makoto said with a humorless laugh. "I guess I didn't know it was this close."

Haru gave him a sad smile and then helped Makoto to his feet. His smile vanished when he saw Makoto wobble and he reached out to steady him.

"Can you walk?" Haru asked.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry," Makoto apologized.

"Don't apologize," Haru said. He turned to face the path ahead. "Ready to keep going?"

Makoto sighed and then nodded, letting Haru take a few steps in front of him. He took a deep breath and set his shoulders, casting a glance at the restaurant before taking a step to catch up with Haru.

But once he had taken a few steps past the restaurant, he froze.

Wait.

What… what was that?

Makoto took steps back and then walked up to the front of the restaurant. He peered in through the front door, squinting his eyes to see inside.

"Makoto?" Haru called from behind, noticing that his friend had not been following. Makoto heard Haru's footsteps from behind as he backtracked. "What's wrong?"

Makoto pointed inside the front door and looked at Haru with a concerned expression.

"Do you see that?" Makoto asked.

Haru stepped up to the door and peered inside. "See what?"

"The light," Makoto said, turning back to the door and tapping on the glass. "The light in the kitchen—It's on."

Haru blinked and paused, his eyes slowly growing wide. Recognition lit up on his face and he whipped his head to look at Makoto.

"I usually turn off the light in the kitchen," Haru said.

Makoto and Haru stared at each other for a moment, shocked looks on their faces.

And then, Haru scrambled for his keys in his pocket. Once he got the keys out, he inserted them into the lock and opened up the front door, holding it open for Makoto to run in behind him.

They both sprinted towards the kitchen, Makoto's heart racing.

Please let that be them, Makoto thought. *Please…*

Mom… Dad… please…

Let them be safe.

Makoto burst through the kitchen door, Haru following him.

"Ran? Ren?!" Makoto called.

He was met with silence, and Makoto worried that he was wrong. He felt his heart sink, wondering if someone had truly just forgotten to turn out the light that night. The disappointment was heavy in his chest as he reluctantly turned around to leave.

He put his hand on the door.

Sorry, Mom, Dad…

I'm so, so sorry…

He pushed on the door to leave.

"Onii-chan?"

Makoto froze.

His heart leapt in his chest and threatened to stop altogether.

That voice…

Was it…?

Makoto slowly turned around and searched for the source of the voice.

Peeking around the corner were two sets of eyes, one set brown and the other a greenish blue.

"Ran? Ren?" Makoto whispered.

Ran and Ren's eyes lit up, shining brilliantly.

It's them, Makoto thought, a lump forming in his throat.

It's really them!

I've found them!

"Onii-chan!" Ren yelled, shimmering tears running down his cheeks.

"Onii-chan!" Ran shouted.

They rushed forward around the corner and Makoto snapped out of his daze. He got down on his knees and opened his arms to them, letting them collide into his chest. He wrapped his arms around them and held them close, burying his forehead into their shoulders.

"Onii-chan…" Ren sobbed, his chest hiccupping.

"Onii-chan, you're really here!" Ran shouted. "You really came for us! I knew you would! I knew you would find us!"

Makoto could not hold back any longer. Tears sprung out of his eyes as he broke down into sobs of his own.

"I was so worried," Makoto said. "So, *so* worried."

"Sorry," Ran cried.

"We're s-sorry, O-Onii-chan," Ren sobbed.

Makoto laughed through his cries and squeezed them tighter against his body. He felt a hand on his back and he glanced up to see Haru kneeling next to them, a wet smile on his face.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto whispered. Haru nodded back at him, tears shimmering in his own eyes.

Once he had calmed a little, Makoto pulled the twins back to look at their faces. He immediately noticed how wet their clothes were and the dirt coating their shoes.

"Why did you guys leave the car?" Makoto asked, putting his hands on their shoulders. "That was so dangerous! You shouldn't have run out on your own."

Ran and Ren glanced down at their shoes guiltily, both of them squirming in place.

"We didn't want to go with them," Ran said sadly.

"We want to stay with you," Ren added, looking up at him with the saddest eyes.

Makoto's jaw dropped and then he sighed, shaking his head lightly. His hands squeezed their shoulders.

"That doesn't mean you break the rules and run away," Makoto said, eyeing them carefully. "Don't ever do this again. Okay?"

Ran and Ren nodded glumly, their faces crestfallen and miserable. Makoto felt his chest tighten at the sight and he pulled them back in for another hug.

"I'm just glad you're safe," Makoto said, the lump back in his throat. "So glad…"

Ran and Ren both sniffled, their hands clinging onto the back of Makoto's shirt. They stayed huddled together for a few moments, taking in each other's warmth. When they separated again, Makoto combed his fingers through their hair and looked them over for any injuries.

"Why did you guys come here?" Makoto asked. "You could've just gone back to the apartment."

Ran shook her head furiously. "We just wanted to find a place where we felt safe!"

Ren nodded in agreement. "We didn't know if th-they would be going back t-to look there."

"Yeah, and the restaurant was somewhere they wouldn't look!" Ran said.

"And Nanase-san was always so nice to us here," Ren said, looking up at Haru with wet eyes. "We like it here."

"Yeah!" Ran exclaimed, also looking up at Haru. "This restaurant is like our second home. Right, Ren?"

Ren nodded back, exchanging a tearful look with Ran before gazing back at Makoto.

Makoto stared at them in shock. He did not even realize what kind of influence this place had on his siblings. He knew that being at the restaurant had changed his life for the better, but he never really thought about how it changed Ran and Ren.

"Well," Haru started, making the three of them look up at him, "You know that's what *Rest House* means, right?"

The Tachibana siblings all exchanged glances before looking up at him expectantly.

Haru glanced around the kitchen and took in a deep breath.

"When I was a kid, our family took a vacation to an island," Haru said. "We swam, took hikes, explored… it was a nice trip. But one day, there was a bad storm, and our hotel was on the other side of the island. So, we took refuge in the Rest House that was on the island."

Makoto stared up at him in amazement. The twins were equally engaged, listening carefully to his story.

"The Rest House was dry and warm, and the people in the house gave us blankets and warm food," Haru said. "It was a place where we felt safe during a storm. And the food was so good that I had completely forgotten about how bad it was outside."

Haru gestured towards the kitchen.

"That's why I named my restaurant a *Rest House.* I wanted it to be a place where people can feel safe and at ease," Haru said. He glanced down at the three of them, his eyes soft. "Like… giving someone a place to rest if they're going through something."

Makoto blinked at him, his jaw dropped, and then he smiled brightly. He glanced back at the twins. Their faces were bright now, the tears dried from their cheeks and the frowns nowhere in sight.

A place to rest, huh…

Haru wanted his restaurant to become a refuge for people during the storms of their own lives.

Haru, Makoto thought. *I think you've done much more than that.*

After calming down from all the excitement, fatigue had begun to wear on everyone. All of the tears and running had everyone exhausted, their bodies aching from the rush of adrenaline.

Makoto was sitting on the floor with the twins curled up by his sides, his back leaning against the wall. Haru stood in front of them, leaning against the counter and staring down at them with a tired look on his face.

"What's your plan now?" Haru asked.

Makoto glanced up at him and then back down at the twins. His lips pulled into a frown, his hands rubbing his siblings' backs gently. He took a deep breath, taking in warmth against his chest.

I know what I want *to do,* Makoto thought selfishly.

But…

I know what has to be done.

Makoto closed his eyes briefly, his hands stilling on the twins' backs.

Please forgive me for this, Ran, Ren.

Makoto opened his eyes and glanced up at Haru, his expression sad.

"I have to call Sato-san," he said.

Ran and Ren both gasped and sat up from Makoto's chest, looking at him with wild expressions.

"What?!" Ran shouted.

"You're letting her take us?" Ren asked, tears springing to the corners of his eyes.

Makoto reached up and cupped their cheeks, shushing them softly.

"I know it's hard," Makoto said. "But it's the right thing to do."

"But, Onii-chan, doesn't that mean we'll have to live with other people?" Ren asked.

"A foster home," Ran grumbled bitterly.

Makoto's eyes stung but he nodded anyway.

"You might. For a little while, at least," Makoto said.

"But, Onii-chan!" Ran said, pressing her hands into his chest angrily. "We don't want to go! We want to stay with *you!"*

"Yeah…" Ren muttered sadly.

Makoto's lips wobbled but he bit them to keep them from trembling.

"You can't. At least not right now," Makoto said. He swallowed thickly and then took a deep breath. "I messed up."

"Makoto…" Haru whispered, his brows upturned sadly.

"It's true, though, Haru," Makoto said to him. He glanced back down at his siblings. "I made a mistake and… I'm not fit to give you guys what you need."

"It's not true, though," Ran said sadly.

"It is," Makoto said, just as sad as her. He felt a tear jump out of his eye and slide down his cheek. "And I'm so sorry for that."

"Onii-chan…" Ren muttered, his eyes welling up with more tears.

"I hope you guys can forgive me," Makoto said, his smile crumbling as more tears fell. "I'm truly sorry for not being what you need."

Ran and Ren's faces fell, tears falling from their eyes. They both leaned forward and buried their faces in his neck, their shoulders jumping.

"We forgive you, Onii-chan!" Ren sobbed.

"Mmn! We do! We forgive you!" Ran cried.

Makoto held them to his chest and sniffed, feeling suddenly at ease. The smile came back to his face and his tears stopped flowing.

They forgave me, he thought happily.

Mom, Dad… I hope you can forgive me as well.

"Makoto."

Makoto glanced up at Haru and saw that he had his phone in his hands. He handed it down to him, his face sad.

"It's been almost an hour," Haru explained. "We… we should probably call them."

Makoto's smile faltered a little but he nodded. He sat up and released the twins before grabbing the phone from Haru's hand. He wiped off his face and scrolled down through his contacts until he got to Sato's number.

He took a slow, deep breath.

Then, he pressed call.

The phone only rang once before Sato answered on the other line.

"Hello?! Tachibana-san?"

"Ah, hello, Sato-san," Makoto greeted, his voice cracking a little. "We found them."

Within minutes, a few police cars rounded the corner and stopped in front of the restaurant. Makoto, Haru, and the twins were all waiting by the front door, the chef's uniform still hanging around Ran and Ren's shoulders.

Sato was the first to step out of her own black car. She hurried up the steps and knelt down to Ran and Ren, looking over their faces.

"Are you two all right?" Sato asked, grabbing their shoulders gently.

Ran and Ren exchanged looks and then nodded mutely. Sato sighed in relief, her hand coming up to cover her mouth.

"Thank goodness," she breathed. "I was so worried."

Ran and Ren both grimaced, looking down at the ground guiltily once again. They both knew that

they had probably caused quite a stir that night.

Sato straightened her back and nodded to Makoto.

"Thank you for helping me find them," Sato said.

Makoto tried for a smile but knew it probably looked wrong. It felt fragile and foreign on his face.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed. "You're welcome."

Sato took a deep breath and sighed, placing her hands on her hips.

"In all of my years of social work, I've never had a case like this," Sato said.

Ran and Ren flinched, and Makoto's shoulders rose up by his ears. Haru took a step forward, his stance defensive and ready to fight. But Makoto grabbed his arm and pulled him back before he could cause a conflict.

"I've never had anyone run away because they wanted to be back with their guardian," Sato said. "It's quite a strange situation."

"Sorry," Makoto apologized, bowing his head to her. Ran and Ren glanced at their brother before dipping their heads as well, bowing to Sato in regret.

Sato studied them and sighed, rubbing her temple.

"Well, I suppose I should have explained some things to you before taking them away," Sato said.

The three of them lifted their heads, looking at Sato curiously. Sato stared back and glanced at the twins before locking eyes with Makoto.

"There is a way for you to get them back," Sato said.

Makoto's eyes widened and the twins gasped.

"Really?!" Ran exclaimed.

Sato nodded at the twins and then looked to Makoto.

"The requirements will be tougher, but you have to prove that you're healthy and financially stable enough to provide for them," Sato said. "Which means: no outstanding debts, no major surgeries or injuries, and a new place for all of you to live."

Makoto bit the inside of his cheek.

No more debts? Injuries? And a new apartment?

How long would it take for him to save up enough for all of that?

Makoto's eyes stung and his chest ached. It felt as if someone was taking a sharp knife and cutting him open, right then and there.

"It may take a while, and there will be plenty of inspections and stricter check-ups, but it can be done," Sato said.

Ran and Ren fell silent for a moment, taking in Sato's words.

"So… if he does all that… we can live with him again?" Ren asked.

Sato nodded firmly at him.

Ran and Ren exchanged another look and then glanced up at Makoto.

"Can you do it, Onii-chan?" Ran asked, Ren nodding along with her.

Makoto felt tears in his eyes. His shoulders trembled ever so slightly as he tried to calm himself.

He wanted to be able to say yes.

But… what if he were to make another mistake?

What if he truly *can't* win them back?

A hand came down on Makoto's shoulders, making him jump. He turned to the side to see Haru standing right next to him, his blue eyes firm and shining just like the day they met.

You're not alone, Haru's eyes told him.

Makoto's heart was bring ripping to shreds.

How could he feel so helpless and feel so loved at the same time?

Makoto's breath hitched painfully inside his chest but he nodded at Haru before turning back to the twins. He knelt down to them and pulled them in for a hug.

"I will do my best to get you back," Makoto whispered to them. "I promise."

Ran and Ren hugged his neck tightly, fully accepting the promise.

They stayed in each other's embrace for a few more moments before Sato stepped up and placed a gentle hand on Makoto's shoulder. He glanced up at her with fearful eyes.

"It's time to go," she said softly.

Makoto grimaced, his eyes burning with more unshed tears. He gave Ran and Ren a kiss on the top of their heads and squeezed them one last time.

Then, he let them go.

Ran and Ren, with tears in their eyes, were gently led back to the car they had escaped from earlier. They both looked back to their older brother before stepping inside, Sato's assistant shutting the door behind them.

Makoto's felt another lump lodge in his throat, the weight of the entire night hitting him like a ton of bricks. He did not want to let them go. If he had any strength left in his legs, he would run to the car and pull them out.

But, deep down, Makoto knew this was the right thing to do. And he had no more energy left to spare.

"I will give you a call in the morning about the next steps," Sato said. She placed a hand on Makoto's shoulder, her voice soft. "You're doing the right thing, Tachibana-san. Don't worry. I will make sure they are safe."

Makoto's lips trembled and he inhaled a shivering breath before bowing his head to her.

"Please take care of them," Makoto said softly.

"Mmn," Sato said. "I will."

When Makoto felt Sato's hand leave his shoulder, he leaned his head up and watched her get into the black car. After the door slammed shut, its engine roared to life, and then it pulled out into the road. The police cars turned off their lights and then scattered, some following behind Sato's car.

Then, Sato's car completely disappeared.

Makoto took a shuddering breath and then hung his head, letting a tear slip out and down his cheek. He felt a firm hand on his shoulder and he lifted his head to see Haru standing next to him, his eyes sad and sympathetic.

"Let's go home, Makoto."

After the long walk back to Haru's apartment, Makoto was completely drained. He plopped down on the couch and held his head in his hands, taking a list of all the things that ached in his body.

His eyes were swollen and his throat raw from all of the screaming. His legs felt like jelly and his brain was fried. His chest even felt empty, as if heartless and cold.

He felt like a zombie.

He wondered if the feeling would last forever…

"Makoto."

Makoto lifted his head from his hands.

Haru was standing by the window, his eyes fixed on the city below. When Makoto did not answer, Haru turned his head back to look at him. He gestured with his hand for Makoto to come look at something.

Makoto sighed softly and then pushed himself back onto his feet. He dragged his legs over to where Haru was standing.

"Look," Haru said, pointing out the window. "It's snowing."

Makoto quickly turned his gaze back to the window, staring out at the city.

Small, fluffy snowflakes were falling from gray skies. Some plopped against the window and then melted immediately while the others continued to flow quietly down to the streets below.

"Wow," Makoto said, his voice a little raspy. "I didn't know it was going to get this cold tonight."

"Mmn," Haru said. "I didn't either."

They both watched in silent appreciation, taking in the softness of each snowflake that drifted down past the window.

"It's beautiful," Haru said.

Makoto eyes watered.

"Mmn," he said, his voice a little choked. "It really is."

Haru reached over and grabbed Makoto's shoulder, keeping him steady. Makoto wiped his eyes and stared back at the snow falling.

I hope Ran and Ren can see this from where they are… Makoto thought.

He took in a deep breath.

Goodnight, Ran, Ren.

"Look, Ren! It's snowing!"

Ren scrambled from his new cot in the large room and huddled next to Ran by the window. They both watched the snow as it fell to the sidewalk outside.

"You think Onii-chan can see this?" Ren asked.

Ran nodded, determined. "I'm sure he can."

The twins both quietly watched the snow for a few more moments, the white glowing against the gray sky.

"Goodnight, Onii-chan."

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

If you want to do artwork for this fic, please do! I love looking at so many wonderful artworks and I never grow tired of it! Just make sure you tag me in it on Tumblr!

Just Say

Chapter Notes

Well, guys... this is the end.

THANK YOU ALL for an amazing ride. Your constant support, lovely comments, kudos, and words of encouragement helped me every step of the way. It's been wonderful and I really appreciate all of you guys for going through this journey with me.

If you're curious as to where I got the titles for the chapter, check out OneRepublic's "Say (All I Need)." I got my inspiration from this song! :)

Tayu-chan, thank you for working with me on every single chapter, especially when something was wrong or out of place. You are a wonderful editor and I can't wait to work with you on my future fics!!

Also, Velvoid, thank you for your AMAZING artwork. It really made the story come alive. Keep working hard on your art. You have great talent!!

So, without further delay...

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"How's your head?"

"The wound stings a bit, but that's all."

"No dizziness? Headache?"

"Just… just a slight headache. But I think that's from lack of sleep."

"Mmn. You should take today to just rest."

"I will… Thank you, Haru-chan."

"Mmn."

Makoto sat down on the couch in Haru's living room and hunched over on his knees, waiting for Haru to return from the bathroom. He took a deep breath and then sighed, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

After getting little to no sleep, and all the running around he had done the night prior, his body had finally caught up to him. He could feel each muscle protesting as he moved, his pants rubbing painfully against his sore knees.

But all of the physical pain paled in comparison to the gaping hole he had in his chest. He had never felt so empty in his entire life. It felt as if his chest was caving in on itself, and no amount of

pain medicine could stop it.

With another sigh, Makoto scrubbed his face and then held his head in his hands. His breaths were shaky and uneven, his back stuttering. How was he supposed to just sit here all day alone? He should be getting out there, trying to find another job! He needed to get more money to get a bigger apartment.

He needed to get Ran and Ren back.

"Makoto."

Makoto lifted his head from his hands and drowsily watched as Haru walked back from the bathroom, clad in his work pants and a white shirt. He knelt down in front of Makoto and stared up at him with patient eyes. The blue in his eyes was vibrant and seemed to sparkle.

"You should move in with me," Haru said.

Makoto blinked at him, processing the words. Then he reared back and squeaked, his eyes blowing wide.

"Eh?! Move in? Here?" Makoto asked.

"Yeah," Haru said with a nod.

"Haru…" Makoto murmured.

"You can live here while you save up for a new apartment," Haru said.

"Wait…" Makoto stuttered, moving a hand up to rub his uninjured temple.

"I can help you move your things," Haru said. "And I know that Nagisa and Rei would be—"

"Wait!" Makoto rasped, putting up his hands to stop him. His heart was thudding uncomfortably against his chest. "Haru, I… I can't just… move in!"

Haru's head tilted, his expression not changing in the slightest. If anything, he looked confused.

"Why?" Haru asked.

Makoto sighed, a crease forming in between his eyebrows.

"Sato-san said I needed to be able to take care of the twins on my own," Makoto said. "She said I needed to be able to prove that I'm capable of being a good guardian to Ran and Ren. I can't do that if I'm living with someone else."

Makoto lowered his gaze to look down at the floor in between his socked feet. His shoulders drooped and he curled in on himself protectively.

"And besides… it wouldn't be fair," Makoto said. "I'd be taking advantage of your kindness. Again."

A hand touched his forearm, making him slowly lift his head. Haru was staring back at him with a calm expression. Makoto swallowed, feeling his chest tighten.

It was amazing how just a look from Haru could make him feel so calm. How did Haru do that?

"You wouldn't be taking advantage. This is me being a friend to you," Haru said. "Let me help you. At least until you can get an apartment on your own."

Makoto swallowed, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. Haru's hand on his forearm burned. His offer would definitely ease some of the burdens off of his shoulders, but it was too much. There was no way he could just accept the free handout that Haru was offering him.

"But… I can't just let you take care of me like this without me paying *something* in return," Makoto said. "It wouldn't be right."

Haru's face hardened, his brows lowering slightly over his eyes.

"Fine. You can help pay for utilities or something," Haru answered impatiently. His face softened after a moment and he looked at Makoto expectantly. "Is that enough for you to move in?"

Makoto paused, biting the inside of his cheek. He felt Haru's hand tighten on his forearm, his blue eyes narrowing slightly. It made Makoto's heart squeeze. From the day they met, Haru had always been helping him onto his feet.

Makoto smiled at the memory of them in the sandbox. On a day where he thought he was all alone, Haru appeared, lending down a hand to help him up when he needed it most.

"Makoto."

Makoto glanced up in time to see Haru standing to his feet. He extended a hand down to him.

"What do you say?" Haru asked. "Want to get through this together?"

Makoto stared at the hand in front of his face.

"Are you okay?"

Truly, nothing between them had changed. Even though Fate had ripped them apart, they still managed to find each other in the end.

Makoto's smile widened, the ache in his heart lessening.

He reached up to take Haru's hand, gripping it stronger than he ever had before.

"Yeah. Let's do it."

"Ah, hello, Sato-san."

"Hello, Tachibana-san. What can I help you with?"

"Well, uh… I just wanted you to know that I moved out of my old apartment."

"You found a bigger apartment?!"

"Oh, uh… not exactly. I moved in with my boss. My friend."

"Oh, I see. So you have a roommate now?"

"Yes. I'm going to be staying with him for a while until I can find an apartment on my own."

"Hmm. Is this your boss from before? The one you stayed with when your power was out?"

"Oh, yeah. It's the same guy."

"So you must trust this man, then?"

"Yes. I do."

"And the twins… they trust him, as well?"

"Yes. He works well with them."

"I see… Well, thank you for keeping me informed, Tachibana-san."

"You're welcome."

"W-What? When did this happen?"

"Oh, uh… a few days ago."

"A few days ago?! Why didn't you call me *then?!"*

"I… I didn't want to worry you."

"Well, it's a bit late for that now, isn't it?!"

"Sorry…"

Sousuke sighed heavily on the other line, and Makoto could practically see him rubbing his eyes in frustration. He knew Sousuke would be upset if he called him, but he also knew that Sousuke would want to know about his situation.

Makoto curled in on himself as the guilt got heavier and heavier on his shoulders. He was still at Haru's apartment—*their* apartment—recovering from the concussion.

The boxes from his old apartment were scattered around him, all untouched except for one: the box that contained his parents' shrines. After just glancing inside that box, he pushed it away and sat down on the couch, feeling overwhelmed and pathetic.

That was when his hands developed a mind of their own and dialed Sousuke's number without his consent.

"Well… what's going to happen now?" Sousuke asked, jolting Makoto out of his thoughts.

Makoto fumbled with his phone, almost dropping it, and he switched it to his other ear.

"Um… I still need to get a new apartment," Makoto said.

"A bigger one?" Sousuke asked.

"Yeah. One with at least two bedrooms," Makoto said.

"So… once you get that, you'll get Ran and Ren back?"

"U-Uh, well, that'll make it easier to convince them that I can take care of them."

"Wait, so… so even if you get a bigger apartment, you still won't get them back?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto winced and closed his eyes in shame.

This was such a mess.

"Not exactly," Makoto answered. "They'll need to monitor my lifestyle for a while to confirm that I'm actually stable enough to take care of them."

"And… and how long will that take?" Sousuke asked.

"Well, after I get the apartment… probably three months?"

"Damn it…"

Sousuke sighed again and Makoto grimaced, hanging his head lower. He fiddled with the edge of the couch, his eyes flitting back and forth to the box that contained his parents' shrines.

"Do you need me to come back?" Sousuke asked, his voice gentler. "I can… I can get a flight tomorrow, be back in the afternoon."

Makoto closed his eyes and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

Not this again, Makoto thought.

"Sousuke, aren't you due to stay in Australia for another three weeks?" Makoto asked.

There was a strangled noise followed by a thick pause. Makoto stared at a spot on the wall, his face deadpan, and waited for Sousuke to respond.

"W-Well, yeah, but—"

"Then you need to stay there," Makoto said. "You're needed, right?"

"Um…"

"*Right?"* Makoto emphasized.

"Really, Makoto. It's not that big of a deal," Sousuke said. "I can just drop out of the tournament and just come home early."

"*Sousuke,"* Makoto chastised.

"*Makoto,"* Sousuke mimicked.

Makoto sighed and shook his head, a small smile tugging on the corners of his lips. Sousuke had always been so hardheaded and stubborn, but his passion and love ran deep, making up for his willfulness.

"Don't do anything you'll regret," Makoto told him. "Remember how hard you've worked to get where you are? You had to go through therapy and so much pain and—"

"But you were there for me through all of that!" Sousuke snapped. "You went with me to every therapy session and you made me stick to the exercises that the doctors assigned. You even dragged me to some appointments when my stubborn ass didn't want to go!"

Makoto smiled sadly, a small chuckle rumbling in his throat. He remembered how Sousuke sulked in bed on the mornings he had appointments and he had to barge in to yank the covers away. It was

the ultimate payback for all of those times Sousuke had dragged him to work out at the crack of dawn.

"And now… now you're there dealing with all of this," Sousuke continued, his voice choking slightly. The smile slipped from Makoto's face at the sound.

"Sousuke…" Makoto whispered.

"You shouldn't have to deal with all of this by yourself," Sousuke said with a sigh. "You shouldn't be alone, Makoto."

Makoto's heart was throbbing at the conviction in Sousuke's voice. It sounded so pained that Makoto was almost willing to let him come back to Japan.

Almost.

Sousuke sniffled, and Makoto managed a small smile.

"I'm not alone, Sousuke," Makoto said.

"Huh?" Sousuke squeaked. He cleared his throat and sniffed again. "What do you mean?"

Makoto's smile grew. "Haru's taking care of me here."

"Haru? You mean Nanase?" Sousuke asked, his voice a little more pointed.

"Yeah. Him," Makoto answered. "He offered me a room in his apartment to stay in while I save up enough for an apartment."

"Eh? You moved into his apartment?" Sousuke asked.

"Yeah. I finished bringing in all of my stuff yesterday," Makoto said. "I've got to still figure out where I can put everything."

"And… you're still working for him? In the restaurant?" Sousuke asked.

"Yeah, but Haru said I can't work that many hours anymore," Makoto said with a small whine. "He told me he's hiring another part-time employee to cover some of my shifts."

Sousuke was quiet for a moment, and Makoto had to check to see if he had hung up. But after a moment, Sousuke took in a shaky breath and then spoke again.

"So… you trust him?" Sousuke asked.

Makoto's eyes widened.

"Do I trust him?" Makoto asked.

"Yeah," Sousuke said. "Do you?"

Makoto paused and sat up straight on the couch, his free hand curling into a loose fist on his lap. He bit the inside of his thought of the past few months, how much his life had changed in just a short time—all because one man helped him to get back up and onto his feet again. And again, and again.

"Are you okay?"

No matter how many times Makoto fell, whether it was in that dumb sandbox…

"Are you okay?"

Or on the street because he ran into an open door…

"Are you okay?"

Or even when he had passed out.

"Are you okay?"

Haru had been the one to help him onto his feet.

Then, Makoto glanced around the apartment, seeing his empty boxes scattered on the floor.

No, Makoto thought. *I'm not quite on my feet, yet.*

But Haru is helping me get there.

"Yeah," Makoto answered Sousuke. "I trust him with my life."

Sousuke inhaled sharply and then the line went quiet for a moment. Makoto could almost picture him looking confused and torn. He could hear Sousuke sniffle a few times before he cleared his throat.

"Well," Sousuke said, his voice more confident. "He'd better take care of you until I get back. Then, I'm going to help."

Makoto smiled, his eyes welling up with thankful tears. His heart fluttered a little and he wiped his eyes.

"Yeah," Makoto said. "That sounds like a good plan."

"We've narrowed down the list for foster parents, so we should be getting close to finalizing a home for them."

"Oh, r-really? Um, so… would I be able to see them any time soon?"

"Sorry, Tachibana-san. But until we can find a home for them, we can't allow you to see Ran and Ren."

"Oh, I understand… So, I can't visit them until they get foster parents?"

"That's correct."

"Oh. Well, then can I… can I talk to them?"

"I'm sorry, Tachibana-san. But I can't allow that, either."

"Oh…"

"I know this is hard, Tachibana-san, but this is how things must be."

"I know. I just… I just want to make sure they're okay."

"… I assure you that they're doing fine, Tachibana-san."

"And… school is going okay? Is Ran treating Ren okay? How are their classes? Are they getting enough to eat and—"

"They're doing just fine, Tachibana-san. I've made it a point to make sure they're okay."

"… Okay."

"Waiter! I need some more water here."

"Excuse me, but we need more bread for the table."

"Ah, yes! Excuse me! We're ready to order!"

Makoto huffed and escaped back to the kitchen, nearly running into another waiter along the way. He sagged against the wall and took a minute to breathe. His heart was hammering against his chest and his head was pounding.

It had only been a few days away from work, but the stress was immensely high. He had already completed his morning shift and was now into his shift as a waiter. The restaurant was packed, and it seemed that every customer needed something different every time he stepped out into the restaurant floor. Even though he had been taken off two of the regular shifts, his body still felt exhausted.

And to make matters worse, he had not been able to talk to Ran or Ren in almost a week.

He swallowed thickly, thinking back to those shrines still hidden away in that one box in his new bedroom. He had still not even touched it since he opened it the first day he moved in.

"Eh? Mako-chan, are you okay?"

Makoto nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard that familiar chirpy voice in front of him. He glanced down to meet Nagisa's concerned eyes.

"You look really tired," Nagisa added, leaning up to peer at Makoto's face.

"Ah… well, I guess I'm a little… overwhelmed," Makoto said, glancing around the kitchen. He fidgeted with the empty tray in his hands. "Getting back into the swing of things is harder than I thought it would be."

Nagisa pulled his lip to the side in a small pout and he reached up to rub his chin thoughtfully.

"Maybe you should take a break?" came another familiar voice.

Makoto glanced over to see Rei at the door of the kitchen, his lips also pulled into a concerned frown. A crease had formed in between his brows, which meant he was in thinking mode. It was hard to shake him out of that trance once he started.

"You've been here all morning, haven't you?" Rei asked, taking a step forward towards him. "You probably should rest. You lost a lot of blood when you hit your head, so it's only natural that you would be woozy."

"Oh, uh… I'm not that woozy, actually," Makoto said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

"Eh? Are you feeling sick, then?" Nagisa asked, standing on his tiptoes to gaze at his face.

"Huh? Oh, uh, not really…" Makoto said, his hand tightening on his neck.

"You are looking a little pale," Rei noticed as he adjusted his glasses. "Are you sure you aren't dizzy or anything?"

Makoto sighed softly. He felt that he would get dizzy if they kept asking so many questions.

"No, I'm not dizzy or sick," Makoto said, looking down at the ground. "I just have a slight headache."

"A headache?"

The three of them snapped their heads up to see Haru standing in front of the counter with a worried look on his face. His white uniform was bright under the kitchen lights, and his blue eyes sparkled with nervous tension.

"Haru…" Makoto whispered as Haru stepped up closer to him.

"How bad is it?" Haru asked, his brows scrunching up a bit.

Makoto blinked down at him, a little too baffled to respond. His mouth opened and closed a few times, too many for Haru's patience. His brows lowered in slight annoyance and he reached out to grab Makoto's wrist, pulling him towards the door of the kitchen.

"Take care of his tables," Haru told Nagisa on their way out.

"Huh?!" Makoto squeaked.

"Yes, sir!" Nagisa said with the tip of his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

"Haru, wait a minute," Makoto protested.

"C'mon," Haru insisted, pulling him through the kitchen door.

"I'm really fine," Makoto said as they exited the kitchen.

Haru did not respond, however, and he instead dragged him towards the other side of the restaurant where his office was tucked away in the corner. He pulled Makoto through the door of his office and shut it closed behind them.

"Haru," Makoto said, still trying to fight him.

But, once again, Haru ignored him. He pulled Makoto's wrist and forced him to sit down on the couch. Makoto sighed once the soft cushions conformed around his thighs, immediately taking the strain off of his back. He hunched over and sighed again, holding his head in his hands.

He did not realize how truly drained he was until he relaxed.

"Just take a minute to relax. You've been working all day," Haru said, leaning back against his desk.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed. "Thanks, Haru."

Haru hesitated and then hummed, folding his arms across his chest. He studied Makoto carefully,

his brows still creased over his eyes.

"Is the headache the only thing bothering you?" Haru asked.

Makoto's shoulders tensed, his hands burying in his hair. He held his breath in his chest and then slowly sat up. He rubbed his face with his palm, pointedly avoiding Haru's eyes.

"I… I guess I'm just feeling a little stressed," Makoto said.

Haru's face morphed into surprise. He was not expecting it to be so easy to get the information out of him.

"Is it about Ran and Ren?" Haru asked.

Makoto swallowed, feeling his body shaking lightly with each stuttering breath.

"I've been in some contact with Sato-san, but I haven't been able to talk to the twins," Makoto said.

Haru grimaced. "You haven't been able to contact them at all?" he asked.

Makoto shook his head sadly. "No," he answered. "Not yet. Sato-san said that she wanted to find them a suitable foster home first before they're allowed to talk to me."

Makoto sighed and hung his head, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring down at his shoes.

"She said they're getting close to finding a home for them, but…" Makoto sighed again, each breath sounding more painful than the last. "I just… I just wish that home was with *me."*

Haru bit his lip, his arms tightening across his chest. His muscles suddenly felt tight and his heart was fluttering uncomfortably in his chest.

How in the world could he comfort Makoto? He could not simply tell him that everything would be all right. He had no idea what was going to happen.

"I just… I don't know what to do," Makoto told him. He reached up and rubbed his head, carefully avoiding the small bandage that covered his stitches. "If my mom and dad were here, they'd know."

Haru winced and looked down at the ground, guilt plaguing his features. He bit the inside of his cheek and paused, looking down at the floor.

"Is there no one else you can talk to? No relatives that lived back home in Iwatobi?" Haru asked.

Makoto shook his head, sighing. "No, all of our extended family live on the other side of Japan. And… I haven't been back to Iwatobi since the funeral."

Haru swallowed thickly, his chest suddenly feeling as if it had caved in. He averted his eyes and took a deep breath, sighing through his nose. He had never been good with his words.

"I'm sorry," Haru said, but the apology felt lame and weak.

Makoto leaned over and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, shuddering.

"Don't apologize, Haru," Makoto said. He released a wet chuckle and sniffed. "It's not your fault I'm so weak."

"Oi," Haru interjected, his voice harder than before. "You're not *weak*."

Makoto lifted his head, his eyes puffy and red. He gave Haru a weak smile, feeling his lips wobbling on his face.

"I am, Haru," Makoto said. He lowered his head again and stared at the floor. "I couldn't even properly set up my parents' shrines in our apartment, yet."

Haru paused. He had noticed that there had been one box still left untouched in the living room after Makoto had spent all day unpacking from his old apartment. But it had been pushed to the corner and left alone all week until it suddenly disappeared back into Makoto's bedroom.

So the box had his parents' shrines… Haru thought.

"Is there a reason you haven't been able to?" Haru asked.

Makoto fidgeted, his thumbs nervously dancing around each other.

"I feel like… I'm not allowed to." Makoto swallowed, a lump forming in his throat.

"Not allowed?" Haru echoed, pushing himself off of his desk. He took a step forward and then knelt down in front of Makoto. "What do you mean?"

Makoto closed his eyes and tried to sort through his thoughts. His mind was a mess, his thoughts jumbled and racing along with his erratic heart.

"I feel that… I can't take out their shrines because they're disappointed in me," Makoto started slowly. He lowered his head to avoid Haru's eyes, his cheeks burning in shame. "I feel that they put their trust in me to take care of the twins and watch out for them. But now, I've broken that trust."

Makoto choked on the lump in his throat, a sob clawing its way up and desperately trying to seize the breath in his chest. He swallowed down the sob and took a shuddering breath as he held his head in his hands.

"I feel that they would never be able to forgive me," he said in a sad whisper.

"Makoto…" Haru whispered.

Makoto felt a hand on his knee and he shivered. He sniffed a few times and blinked rapidly to keep the tears from coming.

"You need to forgive yourself, Makoto," Haru said. "Until you do that, you won't be able to move on."

Makoto hesitated and then slowly lifted up his head from his hands to meet Haru's eyes.

"Move on?" he echoed.

Haru nodded. "It's eating you alive and that's cluttering up your mind. You need to be focusing on getting your siblings back, not stewing over what happened."

His thumb gently rubbed over Makoto's knee to let him know that he was not chastising him. He knew this was what Makoto needed to hear, but he also needed Makoto to know that he *cared.*

"You need to find a way to stop beating yourself up and gain some clarity," Haru said. "Like… something to clear your conscious so you can be at peace."

"Be at peace…" Makoto murmured.

He only knew of one way he could clear his conscious: apologize to his parents. But that was impossible now. They were both gone. The only things left of them were the shrines and the graves left behind in Iwatobi.

The graves…

"Say, Haru…" Makoto whispered, his voice fragile. "Would… would you be willing to go back to Iwatobi with me?"

Haru blinked up at him, a little startled by his voice. "Oh, uh… sure. We can go on your day off," Haru said. He tilted his head a little and stared at Makoto. "But… why do you want to go back there?"

Makoto took a deep breath and then smiled. And it was one of the saddest smiles Haru had ever seen.

"I'm going to clear my conscious."

The train ride back to Iwatobi was long and tiring, but Makoto felt jittery the entire time. It had been about a year since he had been back to his hometown. The funeral had taken everything out of his soul, leaving behind crumbling pieces. The thought of going back terrified Makoto, avoiding the small port town as much as possible.

And now, as Makoto was grabbing his backpack from the compartment above his seat on the train, all of his senses were telling him to sit back down and wait for the train to bring him back to Tokyo.

With wobbling footsteps, he maneuvered around the other passengers and headed off the train. Haru was waiting for him on the platform, his eyes gazing around at the station. When he noticed Makoto departing the train, his eyes widened a little in alarm.

"Are you okay, Makoto?" Haru asked, taking a few steps forward to meet him halfway.

Makoto put on a strained smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Liar.

He felt like he was going to puke.

A hand found his shoulder, stabilizing his legs and stilling his churning stomach. He found Haru's eyes and forced himself to remain still.

"We don't have to do this, Makoto," Haru said.

Makoto smiled tiredly at him and he shook his head. He was grateful that Haru would offer him an out, but he knew what he had to do.

His mind had been in a fog for far too long.

He had to do this so he could move on.

"Thanks, Haru, but I'll be all right," Makoto said. He smiled sheepishly at Haru and reached up to rub the back of his neck. "As… as long as you're going with me."

Haru's hand squeezed Makoto's shoulder. He nodded at him, his eyes fierce and shining.

"I'm right here," Haru said.

Makoto's fears immediately melted away as he sighed in relief. The jitters in his legs and arms calmed, and the tight coil that had wrapped around his chest loosened, letting him breathe easily.

He nodded back at Haru and turned towards the exit of the station. He clutched the straps of his backpack and took a deep breath.

"Okay. Let's go."

Makoto led them out of the station and down the familiar street. He glanced back and forth around the area, watching as cars lazily drove down the street and stray pedestrians strolled down the sidewalk. It was calm, not busy and bustling like the cramped city that he had lived in for the past few years.

He found the familiarity of it all tugging on his heartstrings.

He did not realize how much he missed… home.

Makoto turned down the street and up some stairs that led to a tall hillside with a shrine in the back. There were so many stairs and he found himself a little winded. He glanced back behind him to see how Haru was holding up. But then, he froze.

Haru had stopped midway on the stairs, his eyes gazing out over the hillside.

"Haru?" Makoto called.

But Haru did not move, his eyes transfixed on something in the distance. Makoto blinked and then turned his head to see what had pulled Haru's gaze.

Makoto's eyes widened and he inhaled sharply.

Out in the distance was the ocean.

O-Oh… that's right, Makoto thought. *How could I… have forgotten…*

The fisherman and his kindness. Getting the fish and taking them home.

The storm. Several boats capsizing and sinking. Several casualties.

The seaside funeral. Graves for dead fish that never got to live very long…

A hand clapped down on his shoulder, causing him to jump. He glanced down to see Haru suddenly standing on the step below him, his blue eyes casting him a concerned gaze.

"Makoto?" Haru called.

Makoto stared down at Haru's eyes, his breath suddenly catching.

Haru's eyes were blue.

It was not as if he had not noticed this before, but it suddenly struck him that Haru's eyes were *blue.*

Just like the ocean.

But Makoto was not afraid of Haru.

If anything, Haru's presence and familiar eyes were what comforted Makoto the most.

Maybe blue could be something that calmed him instead of frightened him.

"Makoto, what's wrong?" Haru pressed, his hand jostling Makoto's shoulder.

Makoto snapped out of his hard stare and he chuckled nervously, raising a hand and waving it.

"I'm fine," Makoto stuttered. He smiled a little and stared out at the ocean. "Just… just caught in a daydream."

Haru's brows pinched but he managed a small nod. "Can you keep going?"

Makoto pulled his gaze back from the ocean, his heart lulling into a steady heartbeat against his chest. He nodded slowly and then turned around to face the stairs.

"Mmn. I can keep going," Makoto answered over his shoulder.

Makoto pressed forward, taking one step at a time as he climbed up the staircase. They finally reached the unoccupied shrine and turned the corner to head towards the grassy hillside.

As they inched closer and closer toward their destination, Makoto's hands trembled on his backpack straps. His heart felt as if it climbed to his throat, making it difficult to breathe.

Just keep going, Makoto, he told himself. *You can do this. You need to do this.*

Makoto tried to swallow his heart back down and pressed forward, keeping his feet on the stone pathway.

They passed a few gravestones on the way, Makoto's eyes squinting to read each name. He remembered picking out the stones with Sousuke, and what words to put on them.

It was by far one of the hardest things he ever had to do in his life.

Makoto stopped short at a pair of gravestones, his breath hitching in his chest.

His eyes burned and he squinted.

The name etched into the plaque along the side read the character for "Tachibana."

And underneath that name were two names.

One female.

The other male.

Makoto swallowed, desperately trying to remove his heart from his throat.

He managed a wobbly smile.

"Hi, Mom. Dad."

In front of him were his parents' graves, the stones sitting directly next to each other. On his mother's grave, it read "Wonderful wife, mother, and daughter," and on his father's, "Proud father, husband, and son."

It was such a disservice to them. Makoto knew he should have had something more heartfelt written on their graves. But he had felt too numb inside to even comprehend something more sentimental. He did not even manage to shed a single tear at the funeral.

And now, here he was, his eyes stinging and throat closing up.

It had been a long time coming, but Makoto was ready.

He was ready to face this ugly truth and put it behind him once and for all.

"It's… It's been a while," Makoto said, his lips curling into a sad smile.

He took off his backpack and got down on his knees. With shaking hands, he unzipped his backpack and carefully pulled out an arrangement of flowers—purple hyacinths and white lilies.

"Sorry for not coming sooner," Makoto apologized as he delicately placed the flowers on the ground in front of their tombstones. "I, uh… I've been… busy."

Makoto's hands curled into fists on his thighs when he felt them starting to shake. He felt a hand lightly touch his shoulder, the warmth spreading through his shirt. He glanced over his shoulder and tried to give Haru a wobbly smile.

"Sorry, Haru," Makoto apologized.

Haru's face softened, his hand tightening. Makoto took a deep breath and turned his head back to the graves. He tilted his head downward, unable to even look at his parents' names engraved on the stones.

"I, uh… I messed up," Makoto said.

Haru inhaled sharply, his hand tightening on Makoto's shoulder.

"I couldn't be the big brother that you wanted me to be," he continued. "I couldn't keep them safe. I tried my best, but… my best wasn't good enough."

He bowed his head down lower, a few tears falling from his eyes as he squeezed them shut. He felt Haru's other hand touch the space in between his shoulder blades and he shivered, his lungs burning as he tried to choke back his cries.

"I *failed,"* Makoto whimpered. "I failed the twins and I failed you."

He sniffed hard and then wiped his face, cracking open his eyes to see the blurry ground below him.

A soft wind brushed the flowers, sending a stray purple hyacinth petal towards him. He stared down at the flower petal, remembering when he had bought them at the flower shop on the way. He had spent a long time looking at each flower, wondering which one would be best. He stumbled across these flowers, their beauty simple and elegant. And when he read its hidden meaning, he bought them right away.

Purple hyacinths meant, *I'm sorry.*

Makoto lowered his head further, prostrating himself in a humble bow.

"I'm sorry," Makoto rasped. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm sorry."*

His entire body trembled as he sunk lower and lower towards the ground, Haru's palm flattening against his back in an effort to calm him down.

Makoto repeated the apologies over and over again, hoping and praying that his parents would somehow hear him. He wanted some sort of affirmation of their forgiveness, something to let him know that he could move on. He was so afraid that he would be left hanging, never to be forgiven for the rest of his life.

Did his parents hate him for breaking their family apart?

"Makoto," Haru whispered, gripping his shoulder and trying to pull him up from the ground. "That's enough, Makoto. You're being too hard on yourself."

Makoto reluctantly let himself be pulled up from the ground and he wiped his face on his sleeve. His breath came in shallow hiccups as he tried to regain control over the tremors that racked his body. He kept his gaze tilted down to hide his face.

"Makoto…" Haru whispered again, his voice sounding more choked.

"Sorry," Makoto blubbered as he reached up to wipe his nose with his sleeve. He lifted his head, finally meeting Haru's gaze. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Of course you didn't, Makoto," Haru said.

Makoto sniffled pathetically and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. He turned to gaze back at the tombstones, his cheeks burning with shame.

"I just… I just wanted to find some sort of peace out of all this," Makoto said. "I thought that coming here and actually being close to my parents would give me some sort of… sign."

Haru tilted his head sympathetically, his brows furrowing. "A sign?"

Makoto sniffed and nodded, lifting his eyes to look at Haru again. They were red and wet with tears still escaping out the corners.

"A sign that… that my parents would forgive me. And that… that they don't… *hate* me," Makoto said, his voice choking at the end.

Haru's heart cracked and swelled painfully. He surged forward and wrapped Makoto up in a tight embrace. Makoto stiffened briefly out of pure shock, and then raised his hands to return the embrace.

"Your parents could never hate you, Makoto," Haru said. "I could see it in their eyes every time I spoke to them. They loved you Makoto. They *still* love you."

Makoto whimpered, a small squeak coming from his throat, and he buried his face into Haru's neck. Haru reached up and stroked his hair gently, minding the wound on his temple.

"Do you believe me?" Haru asked, pulling back to look Makoto directly in his eyes. "They love you *so* much. You believe that, don't you?"

Makoto blinked at him, his mind reeling.

Love me? Do they…

"Makoto."

Makoto's heart jumped.

Wait, I… I remember…

"Makoto, we're so proud of you."

More tears spurted out of his eyes and down his cheeks at remembering his mother's voice on that fateful day.

It was the last words his parents ever uttered to him.

"We love you very mu—"

Makoto squeezed his eyes closed, his heart thudding painfully against his chest. He nodded frantically.

Haru nodded once, thankful that he had gotten through to him, and then he pulled him back in for another hug—a gentler one this time. Makoto's hands carefully came back up to clutch Haru's shirt, his forehead leaning down to rest on Haru's shoulder.

Long moments passed as they sat uncomfortably on the stony ground, Makoto's head still lazily resting on Haru's shoulder. Haru's hand kept softly stroking through his brown locks, his arms tightening around him when he felt a cold breeze.

Soon enough, their reverie was broken when a loud ringing erupted from Makoto's pocket, causing them both to jump. Makoto leaned up from Haru's shoulder and wiped his eyes.

"Sorry," Makoto apologized.

He leaned back and reached into his pocket for the offending device that had interrupted them and immediately answered it without looking at the screen.

"Hello?" Makoto asked groggily.

"Ah, hello, Tachibana-san."

Makoto's heart leapt in his chest.

It was Sato.

"Oh, uh. Hello, Sato-san," Makoto said, his voice trembling. He was far more awake than he had been just a moment earlier. "Um… what can I help you with?"

Sato cleared her throat. "Well, I'll just get straight to it. We've found a foster home for Ran and Ren."

Makoto could feel his pulse quicken. He looked up at Haru with wild eyes, and Haru stared back curiously.

"A foster home?" Makoto asked.

Haru's eyes lit up with recognition.

"Yes," Sato said. "And I was thinking it would be good for you to meet them."

"M-Meet them?" Makoto echoed.

"Yes. That way they're informed of the situation. And it would give you peace of mind, as well," Sato explained.

Makoto breathed out slowly, his mind stuck on the word "peace." It was something he had been craving only moments ago, and here Sato was, offering it on a silver platter.

"Okay, uh… when can I meet them?" Makoto asked.

"Well, how about tomorrow afternoon? Are you working?" Sato asked.

"Uh, tomorrow?" Makoto blinked, looking up at Haru.

Haru nodded at him, his eyes telling him *It's fine.*

"Yeah, I'm free tomorrow afternoon," Makoto said.

"Good," Sato responded. "Then let's plan to meet. I'll email you their address."

"Okay," Makoto said, feeling his chest flutter with nervous butterflies. "I'll be there."

"Good," Sato said. "Oh, before I go, there's one more thing."

Makoto blinked, tilting his head. He suddenly felt a little scared, wondering if something was wrong. Sato's voice did not give anything away, though, and Makoto had a hard time placing his emotions.

"Y-Yes?" Makoto asked.

There was a pause, a few shuffling sounds, and then a voice.

"Onii-chan?"

Makoto gasped, his eyes widening comically. His heart and stomach had flipped over twice in his torso, his entire world spinning.

It was Ren's voice. It was his honest, fragile, soft voice.

"Onii-chan?! Are you there?!"

And there was Ran. Abrasive, loud, excitable Ran.

"Yes, I'm here," Makoto spoke, his voice shaking badly. Tears started to spill from his eyes again and he was frantically trying to wipe them from his cheeks.

"Onii-chan!" they both yelled.

"We miss you, Onii-chan!" Ran said.

Makoto chuckled wetly, his lips wobbling as he smiled.

"I miss you guys, too," Makoto said, sniffing. "Are you guys doing okay?"

"Mmn, we're doing fine," Ran said. "The beds here aren't as comfortable as ours at home, though."

Makoto smiled. He could practically feel Ran pouting.

"And we miss coming to the restaurant," Ren added.

Makoto blinked and then looked up at Haru, who was staring back at him fondly and gently.

"The restaurant?" Makoto asked.

"Yeah. It's like our second home!" Ran said.

Makoto sighed and shook his head lightly. Ran and Ren had not changed one bit.

He felt so relieved.

"Well," Makoto said, after he had composed himself. "Once you guys live with me again, I'll treat you guys to a meal."

The twins both gasped and then cheered on the other line, their voices screeching in excitement. They immediately began to plan what dishes they would try first.

It brought a smile to Makoto's face, and his chest felt light and warm against the cold air. He glanced up at Haru, who was still sitting in front of him with a gentle smile on his face.

Maybe *this* was his sign.

Maybe *this* was what he needed to find peace.

And *this*… was the boost he needed to keep going.

Makoto glanced up at the graves in front of him and smiled gratefully.

Mom, Dad… thank you.

Makoto squinted down at the address that Sato had sent him on his phone. He glanced around the neighborhood, observing the shorter, modest apartment complexes. He was getting close, but was unsure which complex was the right one. It was probably a good thing he had arrived a bit earlier than Sato had planned.

"Oh, Tachibana-san!"

Makoto glanced up from his phone and towards one of the shorter complexes. Sato was walking towards him, a small smile on her face.

"Oh, good afternoon, Sato-san," Makoto greeted with a slight bow of his head.

"Good afternoon," Sato said, bowing her head back. "I hope you're doing well."

Makoto smiled. Even though his eyes were puffy and sore from all of the tears the day prior, his chest felt light and he was able to smile more freely. He had no idea that just hearing his siblings' voices would cheer him so immensely. Tears pricked his eyes just at the thought.

"Yes," Makoto said, genuinely and honestly. "I'm doing well."

"Good," Sato said with a smile. "Well, they live in this complex over here."

Sato turned and gestured for Makoto to follow her back towards the complex she came from. It was surrounded by a tall, white-brick fence with patches of grass on the inside. It was quaint and friendly, not as intimidating as Haru's massive space, or old and sketchy as his old apartment complex.

After sliding a guest pass into the gate, they walked inside and headed towards a door on the far end.

"Ah, here we are. First floor," Sato said. She rang the doorbell, and after a few moments, a young man answered the door. He was a little shorter than Makoto, but his chest and shoulders were broad.

"Oh! Hello, Sato-san!" the man answered.

"Hello, Hirose," Sato said. "I hope we're not too early."

The man—Hirose—waved his hand in the air.

"Nonsense. We were just getting the bedrooms ready," he said. He finally turned his gaze to Makoto, his smile still on face. "So is this the brother?"

Makoto blinked and then bowed his head, suddenly feeling a bit embarrassed. Did this man know his entire background? Did he know why the twins were staying with them in the first place?

"I-I'm Tachibana Makoto. It's very nice to meet you," Makoto introduced nervously.

"Nice to meet you, Tachibana. I'm Hirose Koji, but you can just call me Koji," he greeted back. Makoto lifted his head and glanced up at Koji, a little surprised. "I figured that if we're taking care of your siblings, then we outta be less formal. It's easier to say, anyway."

Makoto hesitated for a second, studying Koji's face, and then he broke out into a large smile. He nodded in understanding.

"Then you can call me Makoto," Makoto said.

"Makoto," Koji said, testing out the name. "Okay. Sounds good. Well, would you like to come in? My wife should be just about done with tea."

"Thank you, Hirose," Sato said. She smiled at Makoto and motioned for him to enter. Makoto smiled and bowed his head in thanks as he passed through the doorway, politely taking off his shoes on the genkan.

"Well, make yourself at home! I know it's not much, but we do what we can," Koji said as he entered the open space of the living room and kitchen. Makoto and Sato followed him, spotting a woman pouring some tea. "Ah, here she is. This is my wife, Mei."

The woman startled a bit and frantically placed the teapot down on the tray. She bowed her head.

"Hello! I-I'm Hirose Mei!" she greeted.

Makoto was about to do the same, his body ready to bow in a panic, but Koji chuckled lightly and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"No need to get so nervous, Mei," Koji said.

Mei blinked up at Koji and then smiled lightly, a soft blush tinting the skin on her cheeks and nose.

"I know, I just… I just want him to like us," Mei said.

Makoto smiled warmly, thankful that this woman would be so considerate of him—someone who had made a mistake and is fighting to redeem himself. He could not believe that they would work

so hard to make him feel so welcome.

"I'm Tachibana Makoto. It's nice to meet you," Makoto greeted.

Mei smiled at him, more relaxed now, and she nodded. "Nice to meet you, too, Tachibana-san."

"Well, now that the introductions are out of the way, shall we get started?" Sato said as she settled at the kitchen table. She had a few forms spread out in front of her.

Koji and Mei exchanged looks and then moved to sit at the table, Mei grabbing the tray of tea. Makoto followed behind and sat down in the chair next to Sato. He felt unusually relaxed.

"Well then, as you all know, this case is a bit different than what we've encountered before," Sato said. She looked to Makoto and spoke quietly to him. "They already know about your situation so there's no need to explain that."

Makoto nodded, feeling a small knot forming in his chest.

"We're so sorry for what's happened to you, Tachibana-san," Mei said, her face pulling down in a frown.

"Mmn, it's awful. I wish there was more we could do to help you," Koji said, looking equally as sad.

Makoto was taken aback, his jaw dropping in shock. He swallowed thickly and then smiled softly. He had a good feeling about these people.

"Thank you, I… I appreciate that," Makoto said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Koji and Mei smiled sadly back at him.

"Anyway, the reason I've felt it best to meet is because I thought you guys could work together," Sato said. "Tachibana-san is working hard to get both Ran and Ren back into his home, and the twins are wanting to go back with him, as well."

Makoto's hands curled into loose fists in his lap, tension suddenly pulling on his shoulders. He took a deep breath through his nose and concentrated on Sato's words. He needed to hear this and take in as much information as he could.

"You all have to be on the same page so that the twins are the safest," Sato said. "We need the twins to trust all of you so that we can get through this process with as little trouble as possible."

"We definitely want to make sure that Ran and Ren are happy here," Koji said, leaning forward over the table a little.

Mei nodded in agreement. "We will take care of Ran and Ren as if they were our own."

Makoto smiled appreciatively, the tension slowly loosening and leaving behind a warm feeling in his chest. His shoulders relaxed and he lowered his gaze to the table

"That's… You have no idea how much that means to me," Makoto said.

Koji and Mei smiled again, both of them warm. It made Makoto's heart clench. He was so overwhelmed and overjoyed with them.

Sato had chosen well for Ran and Ren.

"I'm glad we're all in agreement," Sato said, pulling Makoto from his daze. "Now, for the little details. Hirose Koji's job can pull him away for a few days at a time, but Mei will be available during the times that he is absent."

Makoto blinked at her and then looked to Koji with a curious look on his face. Koji smiled and scratched at his cheek.

"I'm a firefighter," Koji explained. Makoto's eyes widened a little in amazement. "Some days I have to stay overnight, but I'm sure my boss would let me rearrange my schedule to stay at home more."

"If you can get him to agree, that would be amazing," Mei said with a strained smile.

Koji chuckled nervously. "Y-Yeah, he can be a little tough sometimes…" He looked back to Makoto. "Anyway! Don't worry about the job. I am extremely careful on the job and we have a team of good men who know what they're doing."

Makoto could feel his muscles relax in his shoulders and arms. He managed a small smile and he nodded, thankful for Koji's reassurance.

"Good," Makoto said. "I'm grateful for that."

There was a brief pause before Sato pushed a few papers onto the table.

"Well, now that everything is in order… Tachibana-san, are you ready to read the agreement?" Sato asked.

Makoto glanced down at the agreement paper. It was different than the usual social services papers that he had to sign when he was specified as the twins' legal guardians. This document contained more information on his personal situation and his intentions to gain the rights of guardianship over Ran and Ren.

But to Makoto, it was more than just an agreement.

It was a promise.

A promise to get them back.

With a deep breath, Makoto turned back to Sato and gave her a curt nod.

"Yeah. Let's do it."

"Soup's up! And dinner for table 12 is ready!"

Haru placed the meals on the pick-up counter and turned back to work on his perfect mackerel meal. He was grateful that the new menus had finally been released. It was a chance for him to produce new meals for his returning customers. Even Makoto had helped him come up with the designs of the menu and the different names for the new dishes.

Haru paused at the stove.

Makoto helped a lot with the new menus… Haru thought absently.

His lips twisted as he pushed the fish around on the fry pan, watching its color change with the heat.

Makoto had been through so much in such a short time. Life kept short-changing him over and over again, pulling him away from his dreams and ultimately ripping his family apart.

And yet, he could still come to work with a smile on his face.

How did Makoto do that?

Haru flipped the fish, sending little spurts of grease flying and sizzling.

He wished there was something he could do to help get the twins back into his life again.

"Ah, there you are, Nanase-san."

Haru blinked out of his daydream and turned from the stove to see his manager walking towards him. He had a strange smile on his face.

"Ah, hello," Haru greeted. "You're not usually back here. Is the restaurant floor okay?"

The manager smiled and waved his hand in the air to calm Haru.

"The restaurant is *fine*. Especially with that waiter you hired recently. Uh, Tachibana, was it?" the manager asked as he rubbed his chin. "The single ladies really like him!"

Haru rolled his eyes and then frowned at that. Makoto was *not* a tool to bring back desperate women to his restaurant. He would not use his best friend as a tool.

"So, if the restaurant is fine, then what is it?" Haru asked, turning slightly to turn down the stove. "I still have orders to fill."

"I know, I know," the manager said with a placating smile. "But I was hoping that we could talk in private?"

Haru turned back to look at him, eyes widening a bit.

"Um… sure," Haru said. He turned back to another chef, raising a hand to him. "Hey, can you take care of this for me?"

When the chef nodded, Haru wiped off his hands on a towel and led the manager to his office, shutting the door quietly behind them.

"Okay. What's up?" Haru asked for what felt like the millionth time. He really just wanted to get back to his fish.

The manager pulled out a paper from his inside pocket of his blazer. He unfolded it and handed it over to Haru, who took it cautiously and glanced down at it.

Dear Nanase Haruka,

I am writing to inform you of my resignation of position as manager of…

Haru blinked. And then reread it again.

Resignation.

That was what the letter said.

"You're… resigning?" Haru asked, snapping his head back up to the manager.

The manager smiled, more genuine than before. He shoved his fingers into his pockets and stood tall.

"Yep!" he said simply. "My wife and I are getting older. We've been talking about moving out to the country for a slower-paced life, and we decided that now is the right time."

Haru remained speechless, the resignation letter still pinched in between his fingers. He bit his lip and stared back down at the piece of paper.

What was he going to do without a manager? He needed someone to run the floor and make sure that all of the employees got their paychecks, their work schedules…

He needed a number two around the restaurant to make sure that everything ran smoothly so he could take care of the kitchen.

What would he do now?

"Now, now. Don't look so upset," the manager said, breaking Haru out of his thoughts. "I'm sure you'll find the right man for the job."

Haru sighed, nodding softly. He knew that he could not protest. This man has been an excellent manager. He deserved this retirement.

"Thank you for a great experience. It's truly been a pleasure, Nanase-san," the manager said. He bowed to Nanase at the waist before sending him a bright smile.

Haru bowed his head back to him and kept it down until he left his office, the door shutting with a soft click. His bit the inside of his cheek and sighed through his nose, his eyes moving over the resignation letter in his hand.

He needed to find someone to fill in the huge shoes of the manager position.

With another sigh, Haru placed the letter on his desk and headed out of his office, making his way back to the kitchen to continue working on his food.

Let's see… I could make a few calls, Haru thought as he pushed the door open to the kitchen and stepped inside.

Or I could just… post a sign?

No, that wouldn't be a good idea. I shouldn't hire a manager from the street.

Haru went back to his stove, seeing that the fish was finished and already plated. He pouted, having wanted to cook that from start to finish. He huffed out a breath of air and finished decorating the plate.

"Order for table 23!" he called out and placed the plate down on the pick-up counter.

I need to hire someone from the inside.

"Ah! Thanks, Haru!"

Haru snapped his head up, his eyes meeting a familiar shade of green.

Makoto took the plate from the counter and gently placed it on his tray, ready to head out of the kitchen. He flashed Haru a brilliant smile before disappearing outside of the kitchen.

He paused for a moment, folding his arms across his chest in thought.

Someone from the inside…

He walked to the kitchen door and poked his head out, his eyes following Makoto as he delivered food to a certain table. He smiled brightly at the customers and he bowed politely to them, wishing them a good meal. Then, he walked over to the hosting station to chat happily with Rei and Nagisa.

Makoto had been doing really well the past week and a half. After the twins were taken, Haru worried that Makoto would never smile again. But seeing him working with the customers and talking to Rei and Nagisa… Haru was confident that Makoto was doing much better.

He was also the hardest working employee in the restaurant.

Haru gazed back at Makoto, watching as he took a menu from Nagisa and pointed out something to him, explaining some details that Nagisa probably missed. Rei also looked intrigued.

Haru squinted his eyes and pondered it over.

I wonder if he could handle something like that…

"Hello, Tachibana-san. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Ah, hello, Sato-san. No, I just started my break, so you caught me at a good time."

"Perfect. Well, our offices were just informed that you've changed jobs recently. Is this correct?"

"Oh, yes! Sorry, I completely forgot to tell you. I just finished my training yesterday, actually, hehe…"

"I see. So what is this new job, Tachibana-san?"

"Oh! Uh, well, I was offered the position of Manager at *Nanase's Rest House."*

"A managerial position? Can you handle something like that?"

"Well, this will be the first time I've had such a responsibility, but… Haru, uh, I mean… my boss thinks I can handle it. He said he's going to help me with a lot of the details."

"Well, as long as you keep the job and excel, then you should be well on your way to being Ran and Ren's legal guardian again."

"R-Really?!"

"Of course. You did get an exceptional pay raise with this job change, yes?"

"Well, y-yes…"

"Then you should be able to save up enough money for a new apartment while paying off your debts."

"Oh. Right, of course…"

"Hm? Is something the matter, Tachibana-san?"

"Well… I was actually wondering something."

"And what is that?"

"Um… saving up for a new apartment on my own might take some time. Longer than I would like. And… well… Do you remember us talking about doing a background check on my boss?"

"Oh, yes. The restaurant owner. He's your roommate now, correct?"

"Yes. Would it be okay if we went through with the background checks on him? I'd… I'd like for the twins to live with me sooner."

"Hm… well. Since you've been on good behavior for the past month, and you've been paying your bills on time… I think I could get the process started."

"Are… Are you serious?"

"Yes, Tachibana-san."

"Oh my goodness. Thank you, Sato-san. Thank you *so* much!"

"You're quite welcome. I'll start pulling the paperwork for it now."

"And Ren finally got a good grade in math!"

"*Ran*, don't make me sound stupid!"

"Eh? But you're not stupid. I just told Onii-chan that you finally got a good grade."

"Ugh."

Makoto chuckled, readjusting the phone balanced in between his ear and shoulder before he moved his hands down to look over the inventory request form. They were out of flour and sugar again.

Makoto sighed. Haru must be experimenting with his mackerel cake recipe.

He shuddered. The taste was *horrid.*

"So, what about you, Ran?" Makoto said as he flipped the page for the inventory list. "Are you keeping your grades up?"

Ran snickered playfully. "Of course!"

"What about art class?" Makoto asked.

There was a brief pause.

"Uh…"

"Ran," Makoto warned.

"I'm working on it!" Ran said. "Ren is teaching me how to do it."

"Oh? Is he?" Makoto asked.

He flipped another page.

Haru needed more mackerel.

Of course.

"Well, I'm trying to," Ren said. "But Nanase-san is a better teacher."

"Ooh, you're right! He helped you to win that art competition!" Ran exclaimed.

Makoto beamed.

"Oh, yeah! How did that go, Ren? Did they hang up your artwork at the winter festival?" Makoto asked.

He smiled sadly. He was banned from stepping foot at the school to see them so he had to miss out on seeing their completed projects.

He really, *really* wanted to see what they had done, and was extremely disappointed for not being able to go.

"Oh, it went really well!" Ren said, his voice sounding chipper. "They hung up the painting that Nanase-san helped me with at the front of the school. It had my name on it!"

Makoto chuckled breathlessly.

He was so proud.

"That's amazing, Ren!" Makoto said. "I'm very proud of you both. You've done so well and… you're really helping me out."

Makoto set down the order form and smiled fondly down at his desk.

"Thank you, guys, for being such good sports about all this. I…" Makoto cleared his throat when a sudden lumped formed. "I… I really couldn't have come this far without your support."

Ran and Ren chuckled softly on the other line.

"You're welcome, Onii-chan."

"Yeah. You're welcome."

Makoto smiled and he switched his phone to his other ear. He picked up the order form again and flipped through it.

"So, what exciting thing did Koji do at work today?" Makoto asked.

"*Oh!* Onii-chan! You *won't* believe it!"

"Yeah, yeah! He said he jumped off of a roof today!"

"Wow, Mako-chan! How'd you figure out how to save all this money for food?!"

"Well, Nagisa, I did a lot of research to find the ingredients from different distributors."

"You even found fresher ingredients?"

"Oh, yes, Rei! If you look right about… here. This is where I'm getting the fresh produce from."

"Wow, this is… this is astounding! You've possibly saved the restaurant several thousand yen per *month!"*

"I told you he could do it, Rei-chan! Mako-chan is good at taking care of things! I bet if he was on a sports team, he'd be the captain!"

"A-Ah, well… I'm just doing my job as the manager, Nagisa."

"No, Makoto-san. This is more than just your job. You are creating a work environment that is cleaner, fresher, and more hospitable towards its employees. I am truly touched by your leadership!"

"Wahh! Rei-chan! What are you bowing for?!"

"Ah, Rei! You don't need to do that!"

"Wait, Rei-chan, are you crying?!"

"*No! I am not!"*

"So, these are the bedrooms. This one is bigger and has two beds and the other one is a little smaller. The one across the hall is mine."

"I see. So, how long have you lived here, Nanase-san?"

"Almost three years."

"Ah, so you've been pretty stable here?"

"Yes."

"I see. Good."

Sato walked down the hallway of Haru's apartment, a clipboard in hand and the other furiously scribbling down notes at every chance. She had a fiery energy that floated around her today; determined and passionate.

Haru was thankful that Sato cared so much for Makoto's wellbeing.

"And the stoves and oven? They work?" Sato asked, glancing over at the kitchen.

Haru sniffed and his brows lowered, offended.

"Of course," Haru said stiffly.

Sato paused and then suddenly let out a soft chuckle.

"Oh, right, right. Of course, they work. What was I thinking? You *are* a chef, after all," Sato said with a smile as she scribbled something else down on her clipboard. "Well, the apartment seems to be in order. Now all that's left is you, Nanase-san."

Haru breathed slowly through his nose.

He could do this.

Do it for Makoto.

"Okay. What do you need to know?" Haru asked.

Sato adjusted her glasses on her nose and glanced down at the stack of papers tacked onto her clipboard.

"How do you know Tachibana-san?" Sato asked. "I know that he is an employee of yours, but it seems that you two have met before."

Haru smiled softly at the question.

"We have," Haru said.

Sato raised a brow curiously, her pen stilling on the page on her clipboard.

"Really? Tachibana-san hasn't ever mentioned it before."

He probably didn't know before, Haru thought.

"Well, we met when we were kids," Haru explained. "We grew up together."

Sato's eyes widened comically, stunned. She blinked at him for a moment and paused, looking as if Haru was about to tell her that it was all a joke. But Haru just stared back at her with his usual deadpan expression.

"Oh. Really?" Sato asked. She blinked again and looked down at her notes. "He hasn't mentioned it."

"Ah, well… he moved away when we were ten. And then he lost his memory of me because of the car accident," Haru said.

"Oh my," Sato said, scratching her head. "That's terrible. I mean, I knew that he suffered a pretty serious head injury, but I guess I didn't realize how severe it truly was."

Sato seemed thrown off by his comments. She glanced down at the forms in her hand, her forehead creasing.

"And… what about the twins?" Sato asked. "Did you know them when you were children, as well?"

Haru shook his head. "No. His family moved away before they were born, so I only met them just recently."

Sato hummed, a crease forming in between her brows. "I see…"

"But," Haru said, immediately pulling Sato's gaze up from her papers. "I love the twins just as much as I love Makoto. They're his family, so they're a part of my family now, too."

Sato's face softened, the creases smoothing out. She hugged the clipboard to her chest and stared at Haru gently.

"You really care about him, don't you?" Sato asked.

Haru averted his eyes and nodded slowly, his bangs falling over one of his eyes and covering his nose.

"Yeah. Makoto is like a brother to me," Haru said. "And I want what's best for him and his siblings so they all can move on and be happy."

Haru averted his eyes, a light blush tinting the skin underneath his eyes.

"After all that he's been through, he deserves to be happy."

Sato hesitated, staring at Haru with a curious fondness, then her lips twitched into a warm smile. She readjusted her glasses and then glanced down at the forms in her hand, studying over the questions at the bottom of the page. She started scribbling something down, and Haru's eyes locked onto her hand nervously.

"I see," Sato said as she finished writing. "Well, I'm grateful that Tachibana-san has such a good friend to rely on."

Haru nodded slowly and then waited, watching as she tucked the clipboard under her arm. He stared at her questioningly.

"Um… do you have any more questions, or…?" Haru's voice trailed off, not knowing how to ask without sounding rude.

Sato waved her hand in the air and shook her head.

"I think I've got all of the information I need."

Suddenly, the front door flung open, and a panting Makoto burst through the doorway.

"S-Sorry! I had to finish things up at the restaurant!" Makoto called as he doubled over and held his knees. He panted for a few moments and then tore his shoes from his feet, stumbling into the apartment and bowing to Sato. "Sorry, Sato-san! I would've been here earlier but we had so many customers come in at once and—"

"Relax, Tachibana-san," Sato said gently. "Take a moment to catch your breath."

Makoto lifted his head, his eyes flitting to meet Haru's. Haru simply shrugged at him.

"Um…" Makoto panted, straightening his back. "Did I miss anything?"

Sato gave Haru a calm smile before looking back at Makoto. She patted the clipboard that was tucked under her arm and nodded.

"Well, Nanase-san's apartment is approved, and is background check has come back clean," Sato said.

Makoto blinked at her, his eyes slowly growing wider as the realization started to set in.

"So… that means…" Makoto stuttered, trying to put the pieces together.

Sato's smile widened and she hummed with a short nod of her head.

"Tachibana-san," Sato said. "I think we're ready to move on to the next step."

"…"

"…"

"…"

"Makoto, stop fidgeting."

"Eh? O-Oh, uh… I guess I am."

"…What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, uh… nothing."

"*Makoto."*

Makoto and Haru stood in front their apartment complex, just outside the gate. Makoto was constantly moving, his body either shivering or squirming. He looked as if he had too much coffee and was twitching from the caffeine.

"You need to relax, Makoto," Haru said.

Makoto sighed, hanging his head. "I know, I just…" His fingers twisted, his bones and joints cracking. "I'm nervous."

Haru's brows furrowed slightly and he leaned forward to try to catch Makoto's eyes.

"What for?" Haru asked.

Makoto fidgeted even more, wrenching his fingers. Haru wanted to reach out and separate his hands before he pulled a joint out of place, but he instead placed a hand on his shoulder. Makoto jumped and then stilled, *finally*, turning his gaze to Haru.

"I guess…" Makoto stammered. "I want this to be real. And I'm afraid that… that it won't work out."

Haru shook Makoto's shoulder roughly, eliciting a tiny yelp from Makoto's throat.

"Dummy," Haru chastised. "Dummy Makoto."

"*D-Dummy?!"* Makoto squeaked.

"Yeah. You're worrying too much," Haru said, letting go of his shoulder. "You signed the papers. Sato-san signed the papers. The Hirose family signed the papers. I was there for all of that."

Makoto sucked in a breath and held it in his belly as Haru's eyes tore through him, ripping straight to his core.

"It's official," Haru told him firmly. "They're coming home. *Today."*

Makoto released all of his air in one heap, his eyes burning. He tried to ignore the violent shiver that ran down his spine and he managed to give Haru a small nod.

"Right," Makoto said breathlessly. "You're right."

Haru nodded once, standing tall and firm with a stern look on his face.

"Now stop panicking. They should be here any minute," Haru said.

Makoto nodded again and lowered his head, trying to control the shaking in his hands. He knew

Haru was right. He was always right in these situations.

After months of working, getting a promotion, taking good care of himself, and finally paying off the hospital bills, the twins were coming back to live with him. The process was grueling and it tested Makoto's patience over and over again. There were many days that he thought he would not make it. He thought he was a failure.

But Haru was always there, forcing him back onto his feet and telling him that everything would work out.

Makoto's lips pulled down into a bitter frown.

He was definitely a dummy, too.

"I'm just… scared," Makoto added lowly, his voice trembling.

Haru turned his head to look at him, his face neutral and gaze soft. He stayed quiet, waiting for Makoto to continue on his own.

And luckily for Haru, Makoto did.

"I'm scared that… that it's not going to work out. I'm scared that I'm going to do something to get them taken away again," Makoto said, his hands finding each other again and his fingers pulling. "I just really don't want to mess up again…"

Haru's brows pinched sorrowfully and he stepped in front of Makoto, reaching up to grab onto his shoulders with gentle pressure. Makoto raised his gaze up from the ground, and Haru could see his eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

It nearly broke Haru's heart.

"Makoto, you're not going to mess up," Haru assured. "The past few months have been hard, *really* hard. But you've grown so much, Makoto."

Makoto's lips parted slightly, his green eyes still glassy. But his face had changed from despair and self-loathing to alert, which told Haru that he was listening intently.

"You worked overtime to study rules and regulations about being a manager, and you've read so many books on how to be a good leader. The restaurant has actually never been any better. You understand all of the employee's needs and you do your best to meet their needs," Haru said. "You're doing what some people could never do, Makoto."

Makoto's eyes squinted when the tears filled to the brim and threatened to spill. He grit his teeth and clenched his fists.

"But what if I fail?" Makoto asked, his voice a whisper.

"You *won't,"* Haru snapped, his fingers digging to Makoto's shoulders. "And even if you do, I'll be right there to help you back up on your feet. Just like always."

Makoto choked back a cry, his hand reaching up to rub his eyes. His ears reddened in embarrassment. How many times would he cry in front of him?

"You understand that?" Haru asked. "Everything will be fine."

Makoto took deep breaths to calm himself down, his palm pushing into his right eye. After a few

stuttered breaths, he nodded, whimpering out a pathetic "Okay."

Haru squeezed Makoto's shoulders and nodded back at him. Then, he shook Makoto's shoulders gently.

"Now, get ahold of yourself," Haru said. "They should be here any moment."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a car pulled off to the side of the road in front of Haru's apartment complex.

Haru and Makoto stared at the car, both frozen in place, and watched as the driver cut the engine. Haru took his hands from Makoto's shoulders and squared his shoulders. He could feel Makoto going tense next to him, so he shuffled the slightest bit closer so their arms could touch.

Breathe, Haru's touch told Makoto.

Makoto took a deep breath.

The back door of the car opened, and Sato-san stepped out first. She had a smile on her face, her hands free of any clipboards or paperwork. She pulled the door opened further.

And then, two pairs of feet scrambled out of the car.

And then two familiar faces appeared from behind the door.

Makoto thought that his heart would burst.

Ran and Ren looked the same as he last saw them many months ago.

"Onii-chan!" Ran and Ren both cried as they broke out into a sprint.

Makoto took a step forward. And then another. And soon, he was also running towards them, sliding to knees as they collided into his chest. He held them close, his heart roaring in his ears and the tears unable to stop.

"Onii-chan…" Ren sobbed, his hands tightly grasping on to Makoto's shirt.

"It's okay, Ren," Makoto shushed, his own voice trembling.

Ran pulled her face up from Makoto's shoulder and stared at him with wide, tear-filled eyes.

"You did it, Onii-chan!" Ran cried. "I knew you could! I *knew* it!"

Ren tore his head away from Makoto's chest to look up at him. Ren's face was a mess but he managed to nod along with what Ran was saying, his hands still squeezing fistfuls of Makoto's shirt.

"Y-You got us b-back," Ren whimpered through tiny gasps.

Tears slipped down Makoto's cheeks, his chest warm but light. He pulled them both back in for a tight embrace and smiled.

"You're *home."*

Several months later…

"Well… I think that's everything."

"Are you sure? Do you need help unpacking?"

"I think the me and the twins can handle it. And Sousuke is supposed to be coming over later to help. But you can come over and help if you'd like."

"Yeah. I'd like that."

"Ah, thanks, Haru!"

Makoto and Haru stood at the front door of Haru's apartment. Makoto had arrived to grab the last of his things. In his hand was a key, his thumb rubbing over the edges of the metal.

It was a key to his new apartment.

"Oh, that's your key?" Haru asked, staring down at the shiny key in Makoto's hand.

Makoto glanced up at Haru and gave a small, timid smile. He held it out for Haru to take.

"It's actually a spare. This one is yours," Makoto explained.

Haru's eyes widened and darted back down to look at the key pinched in between Makoto's fingers.

"Really?" Haru asked, his hand hesitantly reaching out to take the key. He stared down at it and rubbed his thumb over it just as Makoto did a moment before. It was warm from being in Makoto's hand.

"Mmn," Makoto hummed with a nod. "You're welcome any time."

Haru flipped the key in his hand and smiled softly, looking back up at Makoto.

"Well, you're welcome to my place any time, too," Haru said. He looked off to the side, his lips pulling to the side. "I guess I'll have to get a key made for you…"

Makoto sighed and a soft whine escaped his throat as his shoulders droop.

"You leave your apartment unlocked most of the time anyway!" Makoto said.

Haru shrugged. "I guess you don't need a key, then."

"Haru!"

Makoto broke out into soft chuckles that made Haru's belly feel warm. It had been so long since he had heard that crystal sound, and now it had become a common thing.

He would do whatever it took to protect that smile on Makoto's face.

"Well, you did it, Makoto," Haru said, sending him a kind smile.

Makoto smiled brightly back at him, tilting his head.

"I couldn't have done it without you," Makoto said.

He extended a hand towards Haru, his smile warm and fond.

Haru blinked at his extended hand for a split second before his lips pulled into a wide smile. He reached out and clasped Makoto's hand, giving it a squeeze. He looked up at Makoto's light green eyes and nodded once.

Makoto's eyes shimmered, feeling overwhelmed.

He pulled Haru forward and wrapped his other hand around his back in a hug.

"Thank you, Haru," Makoto said. "For everything."

Haru gasped in surprise and relaxed in Makoto's embrace. After a moment, he reached up and held onto Makoto's back with his free hand to return the hug.

"Mmn. You're welcome, Makoto," Haru said.

Makoto took a deep breath and then released Haru, stepping back to look around the apartment. He glanced around Haru's apartment one last time before taking a deep breath and sighing softly.

"Well, it's been fun here," Makoto said. "But I guess I'd better get going."

"I'll walk you home," Haru said, reaching forward to pull open the front door.

Makoto chuckled brightly, the sound making Haru's chest flutter happily.

"You don't need to do that, Haru!" Makoto said as both he Haru walked out into the hall.

He tossed his thumb over his shoulder to the door across the hall from Haru.

"It's not like I live far," Makoto said, a cheeky smile on his face.

Haru rolled his eyes and pouted. "I'm just being a good neighbor."

"Ah, I guess we are neighbors, now," Makoto said with a soft smile. "Just like when we were kids!"

Haru could not help the smile that formed back on his face.

After being torn apart as kids both literally and mentally, they had finally reunited after all these years. They could continue their lives being the best of friends.

They could pick up right where they left off.

"Yeah," Haru said fondly. "You're right."

"Ah, there you are."

Haru and Makoto snapped their heads to the side to see two figures approaching from the hall. One

was a familiar face while the other was a redheaded stranger.

"Oh, Sousuke!" Makoto said, lifting his hand in a wave. "You're here early!"

"Yeah, well… I wanted to make sure I could find this place," Sousuke said, averting his eyes.

His friend next to him grimaced and then smiled, shaking his head fondly.

"Anyway. Guys, this is Rin. He used to live in Japan before transferring to Australia. We used to swim together before he moved," Sousuke said. "Rin, this is Makoto and Na—Haru."

Rin gave a kind, toothy grin as he pushed his bangs out of his face.

"Yo!" he greeted.

"Haru is the chef that I was telling you about," Sousuke said.

"Oh, a chef, huh?" Rin said. "I wonder if his cooking skills are any better than mine."

Rin's red eyes slid over to meet Haru's, a daring look on his face. Haru frowned, somehow feeling strangely competitive.

Makoto scrambled to bow at his waist in greeting. "Nice to meet you!"

Haru elbowed him roughly in the side, making Makoto sputter and rub his side.

"Haru, what was that for?!" Makoto whined.

"Stop bowing so much," Haru said.

"Eh?!"

"Well, are we going to unpack or what?" Sousuke asked. "I even managed to convince Rin to come help."

"Eh? Sousuke, you shouldn't have asked your guest to help!" Makoto whined as Sousuke and Rin passed by him.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. It's not like he has anything better to do," Sousuke grumbled as he walked into Makoto's apartment.

"It's no trouble! It'll go faster with more people," Rin said with a cheeky grin as he passed by them and pausing at the doorway. "Who knows? Maybe I'll be the one to unload the most boxes."

Haru's brow twitched as he watched Rin disappear into the apartment.

"We'll see about that," Haru mumbled as he stepped up to the doorway. He paused and looked back at Makoto. "You coming, Makoto?"

Makoto paused, his gaze turning back to stare at Haru's door. He smiled, his shoulders relaxed and his chest feeling warm.

It was amazing how much his life had changed from just one little incident outside of a restaurant that he had passed every single day on the street. He even worried about ruining Haru's chalkboard sign that he had so gracelessly fallen on.

The words still echo in his mind.

"Are you okay?"

From the sandbox incident, to many, many others… Haru had been the one to help him up.

Now, Haru was the one leaning on him to keep his restaurant afloat as the new manager. He was determined to be the one to pull Haru to his feet from now on. He had to return the many favors that he had owed this man, his *friend.*

And Makoto would be living right next to Haru, just as he did as a child. They could continue living as neighbors, partners, and best friends. They could pick up their friendship where it had been so suddenly cut off and tape the pieces together.

It was as if they had been fated to be together all along.

Makoto turned back to Haru and smiled brightly, his head tilting and a hint of red tinting the skin underneath his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm coming!"

Makoto hurried to his own apartment, smiling when he heard the twins' voices from the inside. Haru walked into the apartment first, holding the door open for Makoto.

Makoto held the door open and glanced inside, seeing Sousuke wrestling with the twins with a smile on his face. He held them both in his arms, his right shoulder working and functioning just as it should. His swim team partner stood next to him, laughing and joking along.

The twins, both trying to escape Sousuke's clutches, were giggling and squirming. Their faces were red from laughter, happy tears springing in the corner of their eyes.

And Haru…

Haru stood right next to Makoto at the front door.

Right where he belonged.

Makoto smiled fondly, his eyes flitting to look at the corner where he had unpacked one box this morning. His parents' shrines were neatly set up and cleaned.

Mom… Dad…

I'm not alone anymore.

Haru glanced at him questioningly, his eyes asking him if he was okay. Makoto stuttered out an apology for holding the door open for so long.

I've finally found peace.

Makoto let go of the front door and let it shut behind him with a soft click.

I've finally found…

A place to rest.

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Hey, guys! This fic is over now!!!
What would you like to see me write next?? More Free! or would you like something in a different fandom? I have an idea brewing but if you have something else in mind, please PLEASE let me know. Find me on Tumblr, send me a message or an ask. I'd love to know your opinions.

*Also, I'm working on a second degree over the summer, so my schedule will be a little busy. I might take a little break just until I get some breathing room to write! Thank you guys for understanding!

End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr!

Works inspired by this one: Broken by NightshadeDawn

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!